

1万.南艾薇生版社



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Chaos of Beauty

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Full



INTRODUTION

Entering the Remote City at Dark

Right now it is early winter, the skies is only just brightening up. Shrouded in mist, the world is rendered a pale white, feeling particularly cold as it is covered in a haze, the already remote city, appears to be increasingly desolate.

"Brother Sun Er, Brother Sun Er." by the city gates, stands someone in a soldier outfit, a young man holding a lantern. With thick brows, big eyes, giving the impression of someone who is upright and honest. His breath can be seen as he calls out towards the soldiers pavilion at the edge of the city gates.

Not long after, a middle aged man walks out from the soldiers pavilion. Once his chubby and slightly bloated face sees the youngster at the gates, he smiles, "And here I was wondering who it was, Xiao Su-ah, coming here so early, are you taking the next shift?"

The youngster laughs in an honest and straightforward manner, "That's right. Brother Sun Er, holding up a whole night's shift, you must be tired now. Quickly return home, Sister in law should already be boiling hot water, waiting for you."

Sun Er cheerfully waves, saying: "Xiao Su, amongst all the gate watching soldiers, you are the most warm-hearted. Look at you, you still have an elderly mother at home waiting for you to care for her, what've you come to the city gates so early for? It's a really chilly day, it's still too early to leave the city gates."

The youngster walks up to the soldiers pavilion. Placing down the lantern, he turns his head, saying to Sun Er: "Brother Sun Er, I've brought two flasks of wine. You have some, the weather is so cold even the ground is frozen. Have some to warm up your body."

"Only you, this brat, understands me. Wine is such a great thing, ah....."

The youngster takes out a small gourd from his chest, passing it to Sun Er. Sun Er accepts it, it's still hot. He happily laughs, quickly drinking two mouthfuls. Placing down the wine flask, his face livens up, "Xiao Su, this wine really isn't bad. It's been a while since I drank such tasty wine. Where did you work to get this?"

The youngster embarrassingly scratches his head, saying: "A few days ago, I happen to run into General Lin when I was watching over the gates. He had conveniently tossed it to me."

This little city is a place that's not abundant with fish and rice, nor is it a military site, but is one of the Country of Qi Ling's most remote city. Usually, other than the place's officials, essentially no seventh ranked officials or above would visit here. Yet last month, a senior official from the capital had actually come, the country's warlord, nicknamed "Wall of Qi Ling" General Lin Rui En, turning the entire city into a hectic mess. The General had come for the day and left accordingly, even so, he left the commoners within the city something talk about for the next year.

"So it's General Lin, ah." Sun Er's expression looks overwhelmed with a thousand emotions, "His age is not far off from yours, but has already become a dignified general, truly a young hero."

"That's right, also good tempered, with no officials' attitude, really is a great general."

Sun Er drinks another two mouthfuls, squatting by the door of the soldiers

pavilion, his body flushing with heat, with the mention of General Lin, he grows talkative, "Speaking of which, back then it really was the era of young heroes. Right now, those who hold most power within the capital, whether it is Prime Minister Lou who has the regime in hand, or General Lin who has large numbers of troops under him, they are all around the same age as you Xiao Su. They all say that the current Emperor has just had his second son^[1] last year, all are young heroes."

"Prime Minister Lou is also this young? I remember that he has also been a government official for a good few years now." Xiao Su responds in confusion.

"Xiao Su, did you not know? Minister Lou is in fact the youngest prime minister our country has ever had. When he had become the prime minister, he was only about twenty two years old, it's already been four years now, and he still appears to be no more than twenty six/seven years old. Wielding so much power at such a young age."

"That young....." Xiao Su also starts lamenting, "To enjoy success when young, I assume it must be outstanding talent." Thinking of General Lin who he saw, refined and handsome, with exceptional charisma, supposing from this, Minister Lou must also be a rarely talented person.

Hearing such words, Sun Er coldly laughs, seeing the youngster looking over with puzzled eyes, he tosses some wine into his mouth, slowly explaining: "I've heard that this Minister Lou is a heaven-like figure, but when it comes to his character, it is far worse than that of General Lin. Minister Lou plays with politics, covering the sky with one hand, nor has this matter only happened in a day or two."

"Saying that, then he's a crafty official?" The youngster asks.

Letting out a sigh, Sun Er answers him as such: "Well he can't be considered a crafty official, these few years, I have never heard that he oppressed the common people, plundering flesh and blood, I can only say......Minister Lou can be considered to receive as much blame as he does with praises."

Whilst both people were in middle of conversing enthusiastically, a horse carriage comes running like the wind, it appears not far from the city gates. Sun Er and Xiao Su raise their heads, looking over from afar. Within a blink of an eye,

the horse carriage has already come just over a hundred meters away from the city gates. Sun Er stands from the soldiers pavilion, starting to shake the gourd, he looks at the horse carriage in wonder. So early in the morning, the city gates weren't even open yet, how could there be a horse carriage running towards here at top speed?

The horse carriage was slightly bigger than average, the style of it also falls from the ordinary, it doesn't appear particularly luxurious, but Sun Er's one glance at the carriage can tell that it's not from your average family, it most likely have some sort of grand origin. The horse carriage itself is average, but the two horses pulling the carriage are rare, full body of snow white, big and tall steeds, what's even more rare is, both horses actually looks exactly the same, their running pace synchronised, neither is too fast nor too slow from the other. The carriage smoothly travels forward, as though walking levelly on this not so flat road, and the speed is also a lot faster than the average horse carriage.

In a blink of an eye, the horse carriage has already arrive in front of them, rushing the horse is a middle aged brawny man, with one pull on the reins, both horses' pace falls back consistently, bringing them to a stop. Well-trained, and rather pretty. Sun Er was even more certain of his inner thoughts, not daring to act slow, he walks up, "Dare I ask this brother rushing the carriage, right now the city gates are not yet open, do you need to enter the city this early?"

With the raise of a head, he sees the face of the person rushing the carriage. Suddenly rendered into shock, two scars are drawn from his eyes to the corner of his mouth, creating a vicious appearance, looking somewhat like a bandit.

Seeing Sun Er's unceasingly stunned expression, the brawny man did not mind, he instead reveals a smile, softly speaking to Sun Er: "Lord Officer, we just want to enter the city ahead of time, don't know if you can do us a favour?"

The brawny man already has a rather terrifying face, with the addition of this smile, it appears to be even more savagely fierce. His deliberately lowered voice and his horrific face, completely mismatched. Sun Er receives a little a scare, and manages to compose himself after a while, "This......I'm afraid I cannot. Without the head's warrant, we cannot allow people to privately enter the city ahead of time." Although it is a remote little city, but they're at the nation's borders, so there's more vigilance when it comes to entering and leaving the city.

Inspection procedures.

The brawny man shows a troubled expression, big hands scratching the back of his head, "Lord Officer, we don't have a warrant, but we definitely have no barbarous intentions, please just do us a favour."

Hearing their conversation, Xiao Su walks up, speaking towards the brawny man: "This brother there, please don't make things difficult for Brother Sun Er. We are only watching over the gates, to let people through without the head's orders, requires taking on the responsibility."

Hearing Xiao Su say this, the brawny man freezes, not knowing how to respond.

In midst of this deadlock, a pleasant female's voice comes from within the carriage, lowly calling out to the brawny man: "Lou Sheng."

Hearing this voice, the brawny man that was called Lou Sheng, immediately steps down from the carriage respectfully. Half leaning on the carriage, he extends his hand and rolls up the heavy curtains of the horse carriage. His movements gentle, watchful and reverent.

Seeing the discrepancy between his appearance and his actions, Sun Er and Xiao Su could not help but to look over to the carriage together.

The interior of the carriage is very spacious, and actually contains a small settee, with a woman half leaning on it. Black hair like that of satin, majority of it being held up in a silver ribbon, the rest of her oblique hair draped over her shoulders. The woman wears a white mink fur coat.

Xiao Su has not been educated in literature for any more than a few years, but has often heard others describe a beautiful girl as "national beauty, heavenly fragrance". Hearing his neighbour Aunt Wang say that the Li family's second lady is a national beauty, heavenly fragrance, he has seen that lady, but other than radiant, he had no other thoughts. But, right now, seeing the woman inside the horse carriage, "national beauty, heavenly fragrance" these four words appears in his mind.

He has never seen such a beautiful woman, three points of elegance, three points of radiance, three points of nobility, and finally there is one more point of

soul capturing.

The woman in the carriage sees the dumbfounded expression on Sun Er and Xiao Su's faces, and faintly laughs, "Two Officer Brothers, we are indeed not bad people, entering the city today, is to catch up with loved ones, please do us a favour." Saying this, she extends her jaded hand. In her hand, there holds a gold ingot weighing five Liang (250g worth of gold).

Seeing the smile of a beauty, is like the early melting of snow, the blossoming of spring flowers. Xiao Su could only feel that his entire person found it impossible to think. But seeing the gold ingot in the beauty's hand, it was as though his brain got struck by lightning. Heat rises within him, his face flushed with red, "W-.....we are not asking for money, if you have urgent matters, then you can go through right now, we are not trying to extort money....."

Feeling as though he has been humiliated, moreover the opposition is someone who is like a heavenly fairy, Xiao Su could only feel the incessant shame.

Whatever Sun Er wanted to say, in the end he did not say it.

The woman reveals a trace of surprise, immediately putting away the gold, laughingly saying: "It is I who have misunderstood you two, I'm sorry. Please do treat today's offence with generosity."

The skies had only just lit up, and the city gates open, a horse carriage hurtles forward through the gates, disappearing at the street corner in a blink of an eye.

Sun Er watches the empty street, looking thoughtful, turning his head to Xiao Su, he says: "Maybe something big has happened in our city."

Xiao Su looked puzzled: "What do you mean?"

"Young people, experienced less ah....." Taking hold of the wine gourd, he downs a big mouthful of wine. Sun Er appears to be talking to Xiao Su, but also seems to be speaking to himself, "That piece of clothing was made from the fur of the artic snow mink.....in this entire world, only a few are able to wear it....."

Unable to hear clearly, Xiao Su asks Sun Er: "Brother Er, what did you say?" Sun Er turns his head, "Xiao Su, say, does this sky need to change?"

The horse carriage runs down narrow streets, very fast but smooth. The brawny man attentively driving it, suddenly he speaks to one inside the carriage: "Madam, just now why did you not take out the warrant pendant General Lin had given you?"

Only after a long while, did a voice sound from within the carriage: "Although this is a remote place, in the end it is still within the imperial court's sphere of influence. If my identity is revealed, with his power, I'm afraid it will be difficult for us to get out of this."

The brawny man hears the helpless tone in the woman's voice, immediately changing the topic, "Speaking of which, it's strange, along this journey, where is it that they didn't extend their hands for money, but those two brothers back there, clearly didn't want it, it truly is strange."

"It's not strange......the further away from prosperous places, the more honest towns and cities will be. It really is ironic, without hypocrisy within luxury, you are instead able to get legitimacy." The woman's voice shows slight emptiness, her voice filled with faintheartedness.

The brawny man no longer speaks, only listening to the rolling of the wheels and the sound of strong horseshoes running.

The townspeople must never have guessed, that it is the sound of these horses' hooves that has taken them into a chapter of a troubled era.

Historians has recorded this as such: "This day is heaven's recording of the fourth year, the imperial court's Prime Minister Lou's wife, leaves the capital in early winter, to the border, thus causing the subsequent 'Battle of the Jade Governor'....."

Historically people have often called this movement "Chaos of Beauty".

[1] The words used to refer to the Emperor's son is **Lóng zi /** 龙子 which literally translates to **dragon child.** As all of you may know, the Emperor is said to be the mandate of heaven or the son of heavens, whilst dragons symbolises imperial authority as the ruler of the skies.

Full



CHAPTER ONE

The Emperor Swallow

In the heaven's recording of the first year, the prince with excellent reputation amongst the people, Zheng Liu, ascended the throne as Emperor. This seems to be what all the people wanted. During that early spring, hundreds of neglected tasks had been undertaken, and the country was in quite the flourishing state.

Today is the busiest day of Hong Fu temple, devotees gathers here, not just the usual commoners but also many dignitaries within the Capital. More importantly, the Capital's two most prestigious beauties have come today to offer incense.

Although they say monks are completely indifferent to worldly temptations^[1], after a long time, they too will generate fatigue in their sights. Hearing that two beauties will be coming today, the hearts of old and young monks alike shows traces of delightfulness.

The two beauties, one is the daughter of Han Lin Academy's (imperial academy) minister, Yao Ying. The other is the daughter of the Capital's commander in chief's secretary, Yu Gui Wan. A scholar who has seen the two of them before has once commented: One is a tender flower illuminating the moon, charming

like the flowers in spring. One is a willow branch trembling in the wind, pitiful like the moon in autumn.

Inside the monastery's grounds, a four-bearer dark red sedan chair stops outside the most remote and spacious entrance. When the sedan is placed down, a maid walks up, reaching out to lift the curtain. She speaks to the person inside: "Young Lady, we have arrived."

Someone slowly comes out from within the sedan. Although they have already grown accustomed to the young lady's looks, the four sedan bearers still continue to momentarily feel as though the air around them has been pumped up with excitement.

Gui Wan comes out from the sedan, looking up to see the wide vacant area of the monastery, no unexpected incidents has occurred, it is indeed really quiet and secluded, really in line with her requirements. From the corner of her eyes, she spots two other sedans outside the monastery. A little surprised by this, don't know who else could have chosen this path to avoid the eyes and ears of the people.

Faintly smiling, she looks back to tell the sedan bearers to get some rest, and turns back, leading the maid, Ling Long, towards Hong Fu temple.

The monastery has already sent for someone to wait for her since early morning, seeing Yu Gui Wan and her maid slowly walk up, he hurriedly goes up to greet her. When he gets a clear look of Gui Wan's face, he freezes on the spot, never thought that there would be such beauty in this world. Now, he suddenly understands why the master of the Dharma Hall had sent for him, the one with greatest concentration amongst the younger generation, to be designated to this specific post.

Composing himself, he curtly pays his respects to Gui Wan, "Benefactor Yu, Master has been waiting, please follow me."

The maid Ling Long glances over this monk a few times. Within her eyes, a look of admiration held within her eyes.

Gui Wan nods her head, "I thank Master for leading the way."

The three people walks through the middle of the big hall, no one speaking

along the way, thus increasing the constant cloudiness in the atmosphere within this incomparably solemn temple.

Having just come out of that specifically empty hall, Gui Wan was surprised to see that other than the Dharma Hall's Master Hong Yuan, there is also a man and woman. Although it is just their back views, one can still sense the extraordinary air around them. From the looks of their luxurious attires, one can only assume that if not wealthy, they are at least of honourable position.

Master Hong Yuan has a somewhat solemn expression as he says something to them. In the woman's hand, there holds a kau chim stick (used for divination or drawing lots) [2], looks like they're in the middle of interpreting the divine meaning behind it. The man is elegant and upright, standing at the side. Gui Wan, Ling Long and the young monk quietly stands there, whilst the three people conversing didn't even notice their arrival.

The woman who had sought interpretation for her kau chim stick lightly smacks it down, placing the stick on the table. She stands up, turning around, and meet eyes with Gui Wan. Gui Wan was stunned, that woman was also stunned, the person beside her is even more utterly stunned.

A feeling like that of both sun and moon illuminating the big hall, within that moment, one can only feel the entire hall suddenly light up brightly. Those present, will perhaps never forget this scene, both are women of such exquisite beauty, standing within the same hall. One with startling beauty, one with peerless elegance.

A gentle sound of laughter soon breaks the deadlock, the man accompanying the woman who had sought interpretation for her kau chim stick, laughs out loud. Gui Wan follows the source of the sound, who would have thought, within this hall, there stands another extremely dazzling figure? A carefree, tall and handsome man, his eyes moist and light, his face like crowned jade.

The man smiles towards the woman next to him, saying: "See, I wasn't wrong was I?"

A few days ago, he had told her: You live in your own conceited world, but you should know that in this world, there exists another who is no less than you.

That woman laughs, such splendour like that of spring flowers, facing Gui Wan, "You're Young Lady Yu right?"

Gui Wan also laughs, like the poems of the autumn moon, "You're Young Lady Yao right?"

Both did not answer, but both knew of each other's identity. Yao Ying has always been conceited, but seeing Gui Wan today, she too is surprised. When she was just about to saying something, her eyes caught a glimpse of Master Hong Yuan's heavily serious expression, her face turns dark, exposing a slight feeling of sadness.

Gui Wan sees this, and was slightly surprised. Seeing Yao Ying apologetically nod at her, she could only lightly return the gesture. Yao Ying no longer says anything, and heads out of the hall. Within that moment in which she passes by Gui Wan, Gui Wan seemed to have spotted tears dwelling at the corners of her eyes. The handsome man besides her continues to smile, gentle and cultivated, only a trace of frustration barely visible between his brows.

Master Hong Yuan raises his head, revealing a kind and gentle smile to Gui Wan. Pressing his palms together, he calmly speaks: "Benefactor Yu, have you come today to talk about Zen or to pay respect to the Buddha?"

Gui Wan's thoughts were still lingering on the fleeting presence of the pair from before, when she suddenly thinks of something on the whim, answering: "I shall just seek answers from the kau chim sticks today."

Master Hong Yuan was a little surprised, as he eyes Gui Wan, a kind of solemnity diffuses. Slightly bowing his head, the scene from just before surfaces in his mind again.

The stunningly beautiful woman called Yao Ying that had just come, is just like what they say, a beauty as ethereal as a dream. Looking as though some sort of gloominess has enveloped her, a beautiful appearance always end up carrying the greatest of worries. She had drawn out a kau chim stick, an extremely good stick, not only a good stick, but also the stick amongst sticks. Since he has become a monk in Hong Fu temple, almost forty years, yet only one person has gotten that specific stick before. The person who had gotten this stick was the late Empress Dowager, who had since lived a life of all-powerful glory, splendour,

wealth and rank alike. Unfortunately, there was the whole ordeal with the prince's case, and being involved in it, a cup of poisoned wine ended her life.

Today, to once again see this stick labelled as "The Emperor Swallow" stick, Hong Yuan has mixed feelings about this. Legend has it that women who draws out this stick will become factors that will influence the happenings within the imperial court, which leads to the changes within the country. The late Empress Dowager who had drawn out this stick held autocratic power within political affairs, holding the Emperor under duress. Could it be that this woman, who drawn out this stick, will also get involved with affairs within the monarchy? Such a beautiful woman will also be walking the path of narcissistic power?

"Master....." Gui Wan lightly calls out, today's Hong Yuan really is acting rather strange, his condition does not seem to be in line with the profoundness of the Buddha, contrarily, he is mirroring it as though he too has been infected by worldly sorrows.

Hong Yuan composes himself, looking at the outstanding, peerlessly elegant beauty in front of him, he speaks with a steady and calm voice: "Since Benefactor Yu would like to kau chim, this old monk shall sincerely interpret the results for you."

Gui Wan nods her head, "I believe Master." Hong Yuan is a renowned eminent monk, from one's view it can be said that his fame runs far across the lands. All that he has predicted, will definitely come true.

He watches as Gui Wan kneels before the Buddha, sincerely seeking answers from the kau chim sticks, before standing up, and gracefully walking towards him. Within that moment, he appears to have once again thought back to that time, over thirty years ago, that innocent, beautiful girl holding a stick as she runs over to him, letting this monk who wasn't particularly high in generations nor cultivation to interpret her stick. That stick......

The Emperor Swallow.....

It really is The Emperor Swallow.....

How could this be? It is not an illusion, trembling hands take hold of the stick from Gui Wan's hand. Hong Yuan thought that he had gone crazy. The kau chim sticks in Hong Fu temple are randomly taken from the Dharma Hall every day.

There is only one of each stick. This stick, he had clearly just used his internal strength to crush it into powder, how could it appear in his hand again, could it be he's really gone crazy?

Carefully looking at it again, it's clearly The Emperor Swallow stick.

Gui Wan looks at Master Hong Yuan in surprise, she has never seen him like this, he is an eminent and well cultivated monk, always wise, quiet, but today he has been acting uncharacteristically, especially when he took the stick from her just now, it was as though he saw a ghost, his mouth reciting: "The Emperor Swallow, how could this be, The Emperor Swallow....."

The maid, Ling Long walks up, wanting to pull Gui Wan back a step. Looking at the state of this Hong Yuan, he can't be crazy right?

Gui Wan shakes her head, signalling Ling Long to withdraw.

Only after a while, did Hong Yuan calm down, he indifferently smiles, speaking graciously towards Gui Wan: "Benefactor Yu, today I am unable to interpret this stick for you. This stick, I cannot interpret. I do not know if you are willing to listen to this old monk tell you a story?"

Gui Wan remains indifferent, only nodding her head very sincerely. Don't know if it's her misconception, but she feels that Master Hong Yuan's eyes are still looking a little lax. After his little moment of madness, he surprisingly restores his usual calmness, but all of a sudden, he appears to have aged ten years.

Hong Yuan stretches out his hand to beckon the young monk from before who had been standing outside this entire time, "You come and listen too." Not waiting for the young monk's reply, he smiles. Very blurrily, he starts to slowly tell the most unforgettable story in his life, "This stick, is called 'The Emperor Swallow'. Over thirty years ago, there was a woman....."

In the golden autumn of September, today is an auspicious day, it is the imperial court's grand secretary – Prime Minister Lou Che's big wedding day, not to mention it is also the Capital's famed beauty. The entire Capital is talking about this matter, buzzing with liveliness.

The Yu Residence's courtyard has people coming and going, every person is in

a hurry to get things done, but all their faces carries nothing but a look of great joy.

"Ling Long." Gui Wan calls out her personal maid's name, her face calm and composed, not showing the tiniest bit of panic, nor is there the cheerfulness and attentive look of a bride.

Ling Long trots into the house from outside the room, replying as she comes: "Yong Lady, what can I do for you?"

Gui Wan looks at her, laughingly saying: "I told you to get the wedding dress, where did you run off to?"

"Young Lady, the wedding dress is placed in the closet behind you." Ling Long is one who lives up to her name, clever and sensible, get things done smoothly, also capable of dealing with all types of people.

Gui Wan stands up, opening the closet behind her, as expected, an exquisitely beautiful red wedding dress stands before her eyes. Hand stroking over the delicately embroidered patterns, every stitch, every thread, implies the world's most beautiful blessings and wishes.

There is no longer any time to sigh, she must immediately change her clothes. Gui Wan's hands takes hold of the wedding dress, and a sound of "si—" is heard, the wedding dress has hooked onto something, tearing a two inch hole. As soon as Ling Long hears the sound, she immediately steps forwards, coming up to Gui Wan's side.

The tearing of a wedding dress is such bad luck, they must find the culprit who tore the outfit.

Just when Ling Long reaches into the closet trying to dig in, suddenly, she sees Gui Wan's eyes staring into the closet. Ling Long was puzzled, and also follows Gui Wan's gaze to stare. There was nothing in the closet, other than the stick she had drawn out half a year ago, the stick she's never thrown away – "The Emperor Swallow".

Thinking back to the story they heard half a year ago, Ling Long was slightly angry as she picks up the stick, growling as she speaks: "This unlucky stick, it is better to not keep it." Saying that, she casually throws it out the window.

Gui Wan does not stop her, smiling, she takes hold of the wedding dress, saying to Ling Long: "Okay, let us think about how we shall mend this now." Master and servant both takes out the thread and needles, starting to busy themselves with sewing.

Only unconsciously, would Gui Wan look outside the window, her mind filled with endless thoughts.

[1] sì dà jiē kōng / 四大皆空 – in Buddhism, all four elements (earth, water, fire and air which makes up the world) are void, which means being indifferent to worldly temptations.

[2] I have already explained that these **kau chim** is used for divination from drawing lots, it's part of Chinese fortune telling practice, performed in Taoist or Buddhist temples, if anyone would like to find out more here's a link, wiki is your bestfriend – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kau_cim

This entire first chapter is just overflowing with a sense of foreboding to the major events to come and all I can say is that, the little encounter between the two beauties definitely isn't a scene that shall be forgotten...think of it as the trigger that starts the rippling effect, completely changing the fate of Gui Wan and all other characters throughout the novel.

Full



CHAPTER TWO

The Frost-like Youth

A tranquil pavilion connected to the pond, with no fencing, clear blue water, white jaded steps, as if it has all melted into one. A figure of graceful demeanour sits on the jade steps, blending in together with the water and jade.

Satin-like black hair submissively held back in a silver ribbon, making Gui Wan's skin look even more so as white as snow, that face of incomparable beauty, carrying a shallow smile, sitting alone on top of the jade steps, sinking quietly into her own world.

Reaching out to fiddle with the water, circles and circles of ripples disperses out from her hand, seeming to find it interesting, she takes to the trouble of doing the same thing over and over again, even her thoughts had already flew far away. Things that have happened during this half of the month, provides a lot to think about, she needs to organise her thoughts.

Half a month ago, she was made the most glorious woman within the whole of the Capital, marrying into the Prime Minister Estate, wedded to someone whose position stands next to that of the Emperor.

That wedding dress had a hole, but under Ling Long's hands, not even the slightest flaw could be detected, however.....does not seeing it means that it's not there? Because all traces of the torn hole has been concealed with embroidery, does that make the torn hole non-existent then?

She does not like to deceive oneself nor others.

The ripples forms loops after loops, her cool hand feels the upwelling, but she still has no intention to retract her hand.

Her husband wields too much power, such power that is rivalled to none, what's even more rare, is that he is an elegantly handsome man, gentle, and considerate of others. It seems like he has no flaws, with a slight trace of sarcasm, she laughs.

Never thought that, on their wedding night, she never even got to see this legendary flawless husband.

"He's gone into the palace, with urgent matters arising in the palace, the groom has no way to get out. As the Prime Minister Madam, please understand, he has after all achieved such great success at such young age. In future, he will still need your support." Nanny Zhang explains to her with a smile

"Doesn't the palace forbid men from staying over?"

"How is Prime Minister Lou the same as others, he has received a warrant, with freedom of access, the Emperor has even set up a living quarter for him."

.....

Her husband really stands right above the skies.

Her wedding night, with someone else's desperate flattery, praise and hospitality, passes by in a blur.

On the second day, a greater shock was awaiting her. Just when she was eating her breakfast, her husband hurriedly returns. She may very possibly never forget that moment, when she lifts her head, freezing in place.

Her husband is the very man who was accompanying Yao Ying pray for the kau chim sticks half a year ago. However, somewhat different from half a year ago, this man appears to look deeper (as in he is concealing his real feelings more) than back then, looking more dignified with this air of containing but not revealing.

She suddenly feels like her mind has fallen into slight chaos. When she had met him half a year ago, she did not know of his identity, and even thought he and Yao Ying were a pair of fine jade-like couple. A month after offering prayers to the Buddha, she heard that Yao Ying will be entering the palace as an imperial concubine. At that time, she had even lamented incessantly for her, occasionally thinking of that graceful man who had accompanied her by her side.

Didn't think that he'd show up right in front of her right now, with such identity too.

Her mouth hangs slightly open, wanting to say something, but doesn't know how to address him, so she simply says nothing, waiting for him to speak.

Sincerely smiling, Lou Che looks at the outstandingly beautiful woman in front of him. His heart has unlimited regret that he wants to express, but also doesn't know where to start speaking. Thinking about it for a bit, his first words were actually: "Does the breakfast suit your taste?"

He's actually asking if her breakfast is any good? Gui Wan was unable to hold back, letting out a laugh, she really would not have thought that he was someone who has the authority and power to overturn the imperial government and common people.

This laughter completely breaks through the deadlock between them. Lou Che carries a look of appreciation, watching Gui Wan's laugh that can be considered like that of blossoming spring flowers, suddenly, he thinks of something else, although his expression remains the same, there is not the slightest hint of smile in his eyes.

Noticing the placidness in his eyes, Gui Wan gathers up her smile, calmly looking at him, her intuition tells her, her husband has something really important to say to her.

All servants were sent away, leaving only two remaining in the big hall.

Although she had already completely mentally prepared herself, the following words still brought upon shock to her.

Lou Che says to her, he is unable to be a good husband, asking for her understanding.

She smiles, asking him: "Is it because of Yao Ying?"

Lou Che was stunned, answering back with helplessness: "It is."

Hearing such resolute words, the startled one was instead Gui Wan, raising her head, she looks at Lou Che.

The gentle man faintly smiles, like the spring breeze caressing one's face, his eyes carries a subtle hint of bitterness.

Seeing Gui Wan's serene expression, Lou Che felt some sort of relief, no matter what, he has told her of his endless apologies towards her, his expression showing endless guilt.

The two of them remained quiet for a long while, when Gui Wan suddenly says: "Then how should I act from now on?"

Lou Che softly says: "Other than feelings of affection, I can give you anything."

Gui Wan looks at him in surprise, realising that he is committing himself to a promise to her, an extremely valuable commitment.

Lou Che continues to speak, sincerely, gently: "You can see me as an older brother, as long as you're willing, I will care for you, protect you, spoil you. As long you want it, whether it's gold, silver, jewellery, rare exotic treasures, or even status and power, I will do my best to satisfy you."

Gui Wan was completely stunned, staring into his eyes, asking: "Satisfying everything I want?"

"Yes, satisfying everything you want, I will give you the pride that all the women in this world can ever think of."

•••••

To satisfy everything she wants.

Her hand has already turned as cold as ice, she retracts her hand, watching the

shallow ripples fall into tranquillity. She laughs, the pond reflects her looks, actually looking as though there is two beauties in general, seemingly a bit sly.

What to do? Exactly what is she to do?

Growing up in a wealthy family since young, she is used to seeing the scheming between individuals, used to seeing men with many wives, her interest in romantic feelings has long faded, she is not bent on pursuing it. A husband like this, should already be considered the best.

To be able to give her no requirements, no burden; even promising to give her the world's best materialistic comforts, looks, power, status, lacking in nothing. This half of the month, as he has promised, the two of them got along like brother and sister, and he even dotes on her a lot. Rare treasures in the world is continuously sent to her, her older brother's official position has been promoted three grades overnight. All the glory is drawing in close to her.

He is pleasing her, doing his best to satisfy her.

To have such a husband, what else is there to be dissatisfied with?

What else is there to be dissatisfied with?

Gui Wan laughs, laughing delicately, laughing haughtily, laughing frivolously, she does not understand, really does not understand, she's gained everything, but also seems like she's gained nothing, what exactly is it she wants, she herself does not know.

Her hand is still ice cold, extending her hands, staring at her slender fingers, she suddenly takes notice of the jade bangle on her wrist, blending in with her skin, crystal clear. Within the white jade there is also fine streams like that of red blood, raising her hand, they gently flow, as though it's alive. The average people would not have even thought, this jade bangle was meticulously made from the world famous suet white jade, what's more valuable is the streams of red in it, the Qiong state's tribute –Red Melody Suet Bangle, is worn on her wrist.

This bangle's worth can provide three months of living expenses for everyone within the Capital, so valuable, so luxurious, ah~, so ironic.

Love cannot be self-prohibited, she has often been thinking of Yao Ying this past half of the month.

That woman who has entered the palace, exactly is she fortunate or unfortunate?

Gui Wan lightly lets out a sigh, unable to understand her own thoughts, this past half of the month, she has more or less already figured out the whole story, but towards that familiar yet unfamiliar woman, she herself cannot figure out whether it is hate, whether it is anger, or whether it is frustration.

Hearing that Yao Ying has been selected to enter the palace, impressively receiving doting love, only half a year, and she has already became one of the highest ranked imperial consorts, but regarding the power struggle within the palace, it seems like she cannot fully adapt to it, completely relying on the backing of Lou Che. For her, he shields all sorts of winds and rain (troubles), for her, he is consolidating her power.

What is she thinking? Feeling guilty, so she finds her lover a wife who is no less than herself?

No wonder when she had received the granting of the wedding edict, she had felt it was weird, so it was because of such reason.

And exactly what was her graceful husband thinking? To fall in love with the same woman as the Emperor, but because of the difference in power, has no choice but to let go, but then willingly toys with political trickery for her, whether this is counted as success it will still be of backstabbing scheming, failure will also still be of backstabbing scheming.

.....all is chaotic, not understanding is chaotic, understanding is also chaotic.

Not bothering is chaotic, to bother is still chaotic, it could also be considered chaos on top of chaos.

Not going to think about it, don't want to think about it, her heart, is vexed.

She props herself up with her hands, lightly rubbing at her slightly numb legs, lifting her loose hair, she faces the bright and clean water, tidying up her appearance.

Lou Che walks into the back garden of his home, and sees such beautiful view.

Clear water accompanied by jade steps, sitting on top of the jade steps is Gui Wan, facing the water that is as clear and bright as a mirror, brushing her hair. Natural elegance in her actions, stunningly beautiful face, really the face of a hibiscus flower, jade willow posture, unspeakable style, peerless elegance that one can never get tired of.

Exactly how stunning his own wife is, he knows.

Other than beauty, she also has more profound qualities, indifference, nobility, and also some sort of carefreeness.

He owes her, owes her happiness, that is why he is doing all he can, making it up to her in other areas.

He has promised her, to satisfy all her wants, when she needs her happiness, he is willing to act like any older brother would, giving her her freedom, allowing her to soar high.

Walking up behind Gui Wan, he gently calls out to her: "Gui Wan."

Suddenly turning her head, once she sees him, Gui Wan reveals a smile like that of blooming flowers: "My Lord Husband."

After getting married, the addressment she gave him, husband is identity, and lord is status, how appropriate of a title.

Hearing this, Lou Che lets out a little laugh, without realising, he had already gotten used to her pleasantly sweet calling.

"You must be bored at home right?" This half of the month, the madams of high ranking officials and honourable people have been coming to visit every day. He knows that she has handled it very well, she has her own way of dealing with common customs, and even skilfully gets the job done with ease.

Compared to the intrinsic quality of those fragile women within the palace, she is different.

She is definitely not as innocent as she appears to be, compared to her delicate appearance, she can be considered to be much more self-orientated, much more stronger on the inside.

Seeing her slightly questioning look, he suggests "I'll take you out for a wander,

how's that?" His tone carrying a touch of coddling.

She can finally go out? Gui Wan was jumping in joy inside, hurrying to support her body, she stands up, answering very honestly: "I already got bored a long time ago, can I go out now? Where are we going?"

Seeing her looking so cheerful, he also felt happy inside. Lou Che laughingly says: "It's really lively outside today, you'd definitely enjoy it."

"En. I feel like I haven't been out for a long time." Brushing the dust of herself, she strides forwards, heading out. Turning around, "Didn't you say to go out? The sun will be setting soon."

Lou Che seeing her expression like that of a child's, was infected by that trace of endlessly cheerful atmosphere as he follows after her.

The two of them had just arrived at the door, when the caretaker was already hastily rushing over, his expression stern.

Seeing this, Gui Wan already knew what was going on, her bitter smile fleeting like the wind.

The caretaker respectfully bows: "My Lord, Madam, this is an urgent call from the palace."

Indeed, it is just as she had expected, Gui Wan remains placid. Lou Che accepts the pamphlet, quickly skimming through it, without the slightest change in his face, he turns his head with a smile, facing Gui Wan, guiltily speaking: "Gui Wan, matters have arose in the palace, I won't be able to accompany you today. I'm truly sorry."

Seeing him smile so moderately, with such elegant demeanour, she did not mind: "It doesn't matter, I'll be fine with going alone."

"Bring a lot a people with you when you go out." For a woman to be going out, especially a woman with beauty that cannot be missed, safety should be placed at highest priority.

Gui Wan smiles, slyly letting out a little laugh, "Don't worry."

Seeing that smile of hers, he was put at ease, turning around, he heads out the main doors with hasty steps. In a blink of an eye, he had already disappeared

from Gui Wan's line of sight.

Seeing that the caretaker was still respectfully standing in position, Gui Wan orders: "Prepare a set suitable menswear for me."

The caretaker nods his head, not asking a single question, not expressing anything, still ever so respectful as he withdraws. Watching him, Gui Wan knows, before a incense stick burns out, the outfit would have already be brought to her. Seeing the servants in this house, she understands how Lou Che is able to smoothly sail through the imperial government.

Secretly laughing at herself for thinking so far off, it is better to just change her outfit first, then she can take to the streets in a moment. With an interval of the time it takes to burn out an incense stick, the backdoor of Minister Lou's residence which is not often opened, is opened from the inside. A slender figure walks out, in robes embroidered with silver threads, with a jade belt and paper fan, a preposterously beautiful appearance, a peerless look revealed when one gazes a little longer. Recognising the directions, she heads towards the liveliest place in the Capital – Bai Hua Street.



Along this road, the place was decorated with lanterns and festoons, it was indeed incredibly lively. Gui Wan has never left the doors of her house at this time, everything seemed very intriguing.

Everyone's faces appeared to be filled with happiness, and she could not help but to feel puzzled, today is not exactly a festive day, why is there this atmosphere of celebration? Just then she just happens to see a kind looking old man at a stall, she walks up to him, softly speaking in a low voice: "Elder, it's particularly lively today, what is the reason for this?"

The elderly does not even raise his head: "Youngsters tend to only know how to have fun, not caring about the nation's affairs. Today, young General Lin will be returning to the Capital, in a while, he shall be passing through Bai Hua Street."

Is it the young Warlord known as "Wall of Qi Ling"? Gui Wan suddenly have other thoughts, wanting to take a look at this young hero who reportedly holds an equal share of honour with her husband.

The elderly was still quietly babbling on: "Youngsters these days, really is....." Without finishing his words, he raises his head, and sees the smiling Gui Wan. Startled, his following words were swallowed whole, suddenly unable to utter a word.

Gui Wan nods at him, smiling as she says a word of thanks, then heads towards the heart of Bai Hua Street.

The elderly was completely dumbfounded, his mouth muttering: "Young people these days.....are they all this good looking?"

It is Gui Wan's first time to encounter such liveliness. In the past, she has taken part in celebrating festivals, but as the daughter of a high official, she would be sat high above everyone else every time, overlooking the common people celebrating There would always be a feeling of being separated by a veil, like she is hazily watching a performance. She never knew that, standing amongst the commoners like this, personally feeling the happiness of celebrations, can actually be so heartfelt.

The new Emperor ascending the throne, achieving victory over the wars of the borders, everyone was celebrating, every face lit with a smile, the friendliness, the happiness, being infected by such, Gui Wan's face also carries a smile.

.....

Wandering around the market for nearly two hours, the sky was gradually darkening. Although rumours were everywhere, stating that the young General Lin would enter the Capital and pass through Bai Hua Street, but to this time there has been no sighting of any armies passing through Bai Hua Street.

Gui Wan was somewhat disappointed, not to mention her belly is already starving. In the midst of hesitating, her eyes catches onto the "Lai Fu Restaurant" sign at the end of the street, the pleasant aroma wafting out from within. She was just contemplating whether to dine outside, when her feet had honestly brought her to the front of the restaurant.

In this flourishing city, Lai Fu Restaurant can be considered to be a second-rated restaurant. Those that are rated high and low mixed together^[1]. With both the families of reputable officials as well as the coming and goings of Jiang Hu people, the restaurant is full of people, looking rather lively.

Although Gui Wan has never come to restaurants like this, she is naturally free and easy in nature, so regarding unfamiliar and new matters, she is a lot more accepting compared to the typical ladies of wealthy families. Without the slightest bit of reluctance, she strides into the restaurant.

Waiters were running around the place, extremely busy. Once another customer has arrived at their doors, they work consistently without wearing out in time, and immediately comes up to welcome her, greeting: "This way please, customer." Once up close, his heart jumps, having worked as a waiter for three or four years, he has never seen such a pretty looking youth.

Once Gui Wan steps inside, her heart laments, the place was buzzing with noise, with not a single table free.

Seeming to see through her thoughts, the waiter with a face full of smiles, appearses: "Gentleman, don't worry, I shall find a good seat for you, please wait." Just after speaking, he had already shuttled between the tables, his flexibility of another class.

Gui Wan smiles, starting to attentively look around, just to keep herself entertained. Right when she lays her eyes in front, the waiter had already returned, grinning as he speaks: "I've already found a seat."

She follows the waiter to the window, so it is a window seat. With the windows half opened, the festive scene outside can be seen within a glance. Two customers were already sitting at the table, one is dressed like a middle-aged scholar, the material of his clothing average, his face carries a smile, looking moderately elegant. The other, is a youth in his twenties, a handsome face, eyes

like fine stars, it is just that he holds a cold expression, carrying an imposing manner that warns strangers to keep away from him.

Seeing Gui Wan, the middle-aged scholar nods his head at her, which is considered a greeting. Gui Wan follows suit, returning the gesture. The youth that is as cold as frost, remains motionless, as though he has not seen her.

Sitting down, she just goes along with a few dishes that the waiter recommends, and settles down to show more care for the surrounding environment. The location of this seat sure is good, to be able to overlook the entire situation in the lobby, and also be able to look over the situation outside with a panoramic view. Whilst observing, she finds that that ice cold youth is always paying attention to the situation outside the window. Although he has concealed it very well, but Gui Wan was still able to notice the trace of great interest he shows when he stares outside the window.

Not long after, the dishes Gui Wan had ordered were served up. When one is hungry, the feeling of eating is particularly delicious.

The middle-aged scholar on the same table talks to the youth as he eats, every topic spoken of were all about interesting matters within the Capital and also the rumours circulating around the common folks. Although it is just him speaking alone, and the youth listening, his eloquence is rather amazing, even Gui Wan was listening with great interest.

"Consort Ying receiving the doting love of the Emperor, is like one person receiving three thousand doting love. Hearing that Consort Ying likes the scenery of Jiang Nan, the Emperor has already started a large scale construction project within the palace, intending to build a Jing Yi Hall (scenery viewing hall) within the palace." The middle-aged scholar suddenly mentions this matter. Gui Wan hears that the matter concerns Yao Ying, and inevitably perks up her attention.

The cold youth hears this, and his face turns even colder, his brows knitting together, looking a little dissatisfied.

So he does have other expressions, Gui Wan secretly thinks.

The middle-aged scholar also notices that he is rather dissatisfied, letting out a little laugh, he directly speaks again: "Speaking of which, it is actually interesting.

It is not a unique instance, but has its counterpart, Prime Minister Lou has recently wedded his wife, it is said that he too is also very doting, in order to win his wife's favour, he is recently collecting the world's rarest treasures."

Gui Wan is swallowing Lai Fu House's signature sautéed shredded beef, but hearing those words, she hesitates between. Having no time to chew, the shredded meat slides down her throat, making her choke a bit, feeling uncomfortable, she slowly raises her head, wanting to hear how they'll discuss this matter.

The scholar no longer speaks on, but rather, that expressionless handsome young man, turns his head back from facing the window, his eyes just happens to clash with the observing Gui Wan, and the young man's frown grows deeper.

So he has a pair of such beautiful eyes, Gui Wan was surprised, it's just far too cold.

The youth quickly sweeps his eyes over to the scholar, saying: "There is nothing else to say right?" It seems that he felt the scholar's topic of conversations just now, to be too much of a bother.

The scholar naturally lets out an elegant laugh, saying: "These are the most recent news of the Capital, whether it is Consort Ying or Prime Minister Lou's Madam, both their families are fowls and dogs turned immortals (relatives greatly promoted in status), to not have the successful career of government officials, but to continuously rise three levels overnight, then it is being bestowed gold, silver and fertile farmlands (plentiful meals)."

The silent youth, suddenly says: "Because of two women?"

"Of course, they are not your average women, both are beautiful women whose appearance wins over that of the confederate rose." The scholar says laughingly, seeing the youth show a look of distrust, he immediately says, "Sometimes, women's beauty is a type of weapon, the more beautiful they are, the more dangerous, they can be even more terrifying than that of swords out of their sheaths."

Hearing such words, Gui Wan was amazingly stunned. The cold youth hearing such words, also reveals a thoughtful expression, after a little moment, the

youth coldly sounds as scoff, icily saying: "Disaster."

Listening up to this point, Gui Wan was unable to hold back her laugh, thinking to herself, if this youth finds that sitting opposite him, is none other than the disaster he speaks of, don't know what kind expression he would have.

The scholar and the youth simultaneously turns their heads to her, not knowing why "he" is laughing. Seeing Gui Wan's smile, the youth's ice face shows an expression of confusion, whilst the scholar was a little surprised, secretly sounding a sigh.

Moments after, the scholar no longer speaks, the youth continues to look like he is on alert. Looking out the window, not knowing whether it is a misconception or not, Gui Wan feels as though the amount of soldiers outside, appears to be increasing.

Gui Wan faintly senses a trace of tension, something is wrong with the atmosphere. Luckily, it just happens that she's eaten up her fill, it's better that she leaves a bit earlier. Looking at the two other people on the table, they continue to remain seated, with no intentions to leave yet.

Extending her hand to call for the bill, seeing the waiter's look of flattery and eager attentiveness, she decides to tip him off more. At the time, the moment Gui Wan just had such thoughts, her hand reaches into her waist pocket, and her face completely changes.

Before leaving the house, she clearly brought along her money bag, how could it have disappeared into thin air now? Could it be when that child bumped into her before, she accidentally dropped it, or did she get pickpocketed when she wasn't paying attention? How it happened is not that important, losing that little bit of money, does not bother her too much, but......

But to be unable to pay up right now, really is very embarrassing, very shameful.

The waiter had already changed from his smiley face filled with hospitality to an expressionless one. Honestly speaking, any other time, when faced with customers who are unable to pay up, he would already have cursed out loud at them, but in face of this overly pretty youth, such words, he just cannot bear to shoot out at him. Besides, having been a waiter for a good few years now, he

already knows how to precisely guess what type of character people are, this youth clearly comes from a wealthy background, maybe he has met with troubles, and so cannot afford to pay.

Gui Wan confirms that she really has no money on her at all and started to get a little bit of a headache. What is she to do now? The valuable jewellery she usually wears were left at home for this male-getup. Right now, she does not even have money by her side......

Seeing the observing eyes of the scholar, Gui Wan smiles, at this moment, she really doesn't know what to do.

Noticing the awkward position she was in, even that cold youth turns his attention to her. Gui Wan cries out ceaseless bitterness, she was just about to ask the waiter for some brush and paper, wanting to rely on some written words, when the youth had already taken out a silver ingot, placing it on the table.

The waiter happily takes away the payment and tips, Gui Wan freezes on the spot, she really did not expect that the cold youth is someone who is cold on the outside but warm on the inside. Smiling gratefully towards him, she softly says: "Thank you."

The youth mumbles back: "No need." And does not say anything more.

Gui Wan did not find it uncongenial, believing that he is most likely someone who does not like communicating with others much. But to just owe a favour to a stranger like this, it really isn't very appropriate. Thinking this way, she asks: "Where does this brother live? I'll definitely pay you back tomorrow."

The youth has just lowered his head to drink a cup of wine, hearing her words, he raises his head, looking at Gui Wan: "There's no need, I was just lending a helping hand."

The scholar also looks at Gui Wan, laughingly saying: "That's right, little brother, when away from home, you'd inevitably run into moments of inconvenience, no need to be so polite."

Since they have already spoken like this, to continue being polite would be too much. Thinking this, Gui Wan stands up facing the youth and scholar, and bows to them, "Many thanks, I shall be leaving then."

She turns around and leave, when she had exited the restaurant, it was already time to light up the streets. A gust of cold wind blows by, Gui Wan sees that the amount of people on the streets is a lot less than when she had entered the restaurant, instead, it is the soldiers that have increased in numbers, with two-three people in a group, don't know what they are searching for.

Maybe something has really happened, thinking this, she did not even have the interest to go on a stroll, moreover she is penniless right now. Thinking back to the situation just now, Gui Wan could not help but to laugh to herself, since young, such incident she has never experienced before, it really does feel refreshing.

That youth cannot be an average person, such cold character, and even has that distinct look in his eyes at times of need. Plus there's also the youth's scholar, a well-spoken one. Both people must come from a noteworthy background.

Lifting her head up, the sky is almost completely dark, it is better to return home now. Despite knowing Lou Che cannot possibly return from the palace tonight, but to return late, Ling Long would get worried.

Turning around, she decides to take the small path, then return home through the back door. If the servants see her dressed as a male, it could harm her reputation as the Prime Minister Madam. Although such hypocritical reputations does get annoying, but one still has to maintain it at all times, although this really is contradictive to the helpless.

Sighing, Gui Wan walks to the end Bai Hua Street, turning into a quiet alley.

Later, Gui Wan has regretted her little decision at that time on numerous occasions. If back then, she had chosen to walk the bigger path, then maybe she would not have met with so many troubles. Unfortunately, she did not know of this back then.

This alleyway is clean and quiet, the main reason for this, being that other side of the alleyway leads to the back doors to several senior officials within the Capital, amongst them includes Prime Minister Lou's residence, therefore even though getting back so late, it is still very safe and secure here.

Safe and secure, this applies to the usual daily circumstances, but of course it

also has times of exceptions.

And it seems like Gui Wan has just run into such exception, as she had just entered the alleyway, she only walked in a few steps, when she suddenly sees a black shadow flash past in front of her, she had even thought that it was just her blurred vision, but in the next moment, a dagger had already been positioned against her neck.

A rough, vigour voice sounds right next to her ear, saying: "Don't look back, slowly walk forward."

She obediently walks forward, without resisting, having walked a short distance, she no longer hears any sound, when the rough voice from behind orders: "Stop." Gui Wan obediently halts in her steps.

Yet there was no movement behind her. Up to this point, Gui Wan immediately feels a bit flustered, such silence that makes one feel suffocated, made her feel a bit at loss. Feeling the messy breathing pattern from the person behind her, sometimes fine, sometimes coarse.

Could it be that he is injured? This thought quickly flashes up in Gui Wan's head, but thinking again, the person practices martial arts, even if he is wounded, she cannot rely on her own strength.

At the time when she was trying to think of countermeasures, the dagger leaves her neck. The person behind her suddenly speaks again: "Take your clothes off."

Hearing such words, Gui Wan was getting a headache. She already have nothing valuable on her, if he were to rob her, she should be able to handle it. But right now, facing such unconceivable request, she still has the reputation of the Prime Minister Madam to maintain, she firmly refuses to agree to this.

Great fortune amongst the unfortunate, from words he has spoken, he is clearly showing signs of weakness, Gui Wan is sure that he is injured, it is quite possibly not a light injury either, not to mention his abrupt tone has made her become suspicious. Taking of the advantage that the dagger is away from her neck, she suddenly turns around.

[1] **High and low mixed together** is the meaning behind the Chinese proverb Duo Duo Wu used – **lóng shé hùn zá** (龙蛇混杂) which literally translates to **snakes and vipers creeping around among the dragons.**

Three men, each who plays crucial roles in Gui Wan's life and therefore throughout this novel, makes their appearances in this chapter. First is the husband, Lou Che, who many of you have already figured out to be the man accompanying Yao Ying in the first chapter, second is the mysterious frost-like youth, and third is the hostile figure Gui Wan had just come across. I guess it's needless to say this hostile figure will be the first of Gui Wan's troubles and many more to come throughout the novel.

Also, I'm sure that everyone has already come to realise the novel will be quite an angsty one, and it in fact has an open ending. Fortunately, the author wrote of the actual ending, which by the way is thankfully a happy one, in another novel, although that new novel itself has been dropped, I can still get hold of the snippets that tells of Gui Wan's ending to translate for you guys

Full



CHAPTER THREE

The Venom Pill's Poison

Rapidly turning her body around, a pale face greets her eyes. Using the moonlight to take a good look at the person's face, she secretly screams out "not good" inside, she really has gotten herself into big trouble.

A well-defined face, prominent facial features, with a taller build compared to the typical men, with the addition of his stiff speech, he is clearly a man of a different race, not to mention he's wearing a prisoner outfit, the prisoner outfit exposes areas that clearly shows evidence of torture, he is clearly a fugitive. Thinking of the great victory of the wars at the borders, and seeing so many soldiers outside the restaurant just now, Gui Wan had already made a rough guess of his identity, he must be the defeated and captured commander of the Nu Tribe, concluding her thoughts, her heart laments, all the unfortunate matters seems to be happening today.

Ye Li almost have no strength to even hold up the dagger, escaping has already exhausted all his strength, but he cannot fall down now, he preserves his willpower as he only needs to change his clothes. Taking advantage of the dark, there is still the slightest trace of chance to escape the Capital, if it gets to daybreak, everything will be over. Just when he had wanted to take a breath, the youth he has held hostage suddenly turns around, causing him to be unable to

react in time.

Kill him. He had just switched to this idea, taking a deep breath, but it is at that moment, he sees the youth's face.

Has the Lunar God heard his prayers, and so appears before him right now? He wonders.

Under the moonlight, half of the youth's face is in the light, half of it in the dark. The half that is in line with the light, peerlessly beautiful. The half that is hidden in the dark, peerlessly radiant. The appearance of such innocent face, under the moonlight faintly carries a treacherous charm.

Mind falling into a trance, Ye Li couldn't bring himself to cut down with the dagger. For generations, people of the Nu Tribe has worshipped the Lunar God and this youngster in front of him, has given him too much of a shock. In this perilous moment, he cannot tell if this is a dream or an illusion. Hardening his heart, he raises the dagger to his wrist, cutting at it, a stream of blood immediately flows out, feeling such biting pain, his mind clears up, and he attentively looks to the youth again.

He has often heard that the Celestial Empire (name used to refer to China in ancient times) has men with feminine appearance, never seeing it before, he had never believed this, but now......Ye Li felt somewhat disappointed from the heart, he had even thought that before his death, he had seen the Lunar God.

Neither of them says a word, remaining silent for a while.

Gui Wan's heart was beating rather fast, regretting her decision to turn around just now. In that moment when she had turned around, she had caught sight of the killing intent in the Nu man's eyes, right then, her heart had half frozen, her hand already touching the opening of her sleeves, if not for the last resort, she did not want to use this to protect her life. In this moment of hesitation, the man suddenly reveals a look of surprise, wonder, disbelief, his mouth gently reciting the words: "Suo Ge Ta (索格塔)?"

What's Suo Ge Ta? It's probably their Nu language. No matter what it means, those words had just saved her own life, also saving the other person's life, otherwise, it would definitely have been a lose-lose situation. Her thoughts went

through twists and turns, thinking of how to get out of this, when she suddenly notices the way the man was looking at her was getting more and more strange, it even carried a look of dreaminess......has he gone out of his mind? She was just thinking whether to take advantage of this and run out, when the man made a move that rendered her immobile, he had actually used the dagger to cut into himself, the cut was rather deep, with blood pouring out from the wound.

Gui Wan immediately understands his intent, his blurred eyes suddenly turns sharp again, glaring into her. Not knowing what he is thinking, Gui Wan dared not to move, afraid that the slightest movement would provoke him to do something even more insane. If he is only cutting into himself then fine, but if by chance the dagger makes a turn, cutting into her body, then that's not good.

Cold sweat from her back was already oozing out as Gui Wan continues to carry a considerately affectionate smile towards the other person, hoping to reduce the hostility in him.

Ye Li watches him, inside he was rather impressed, right now he already knows that the other person is a ridiculously beautiful young man, but in face of such situation, he did not in fact scream out loud, nor did he panic, and only continues to carry that somewhat of a leisurely smile. In this moment Ye Li did not know whether he should kill him, time is passing, he is also quickly losing strength, killing him now will be of no help, besides......he looks so much like the incarnation of Suo Ge Ta. Whilst agonising over what to do, he notices the youngster is also contemplating, suddenly a thought flashes up in his mind, this youngster, with such appearance, such composedness, is not an average person, perhaps, relying on him, he can save his own life, not to mention, his instincts tells him, this beautiful youngster most definitely isn't as delicate as he looks.

Right at the moment, with rapid movements, whilst Gui Wan was still unable to completely react, the man had grabbed her by the arm, pinching at her jaw. The very moment she felt the pain, her mouth slightly opens and something is stuffed inside. She had yet to taste what it was, when it had already rolled into her stomach. Heart filled with panic, her instincts tells her, she must immediately spit it out. She reaches out and pushes away the man with her greatest effort. Immediately, she crouches to the side, retching up, not even reflecting over the issue of her pushing the man away.

The man had used up the last of his strength, getting pushed away by Gui Wan, he lies flat on the floor. Seeing Gui Wan's actions, he coldly speaks: "There's no use, this is the Nu's 'venom pill', you won't be able to spit it out."

Hearing this, Gui Wan's heart feels stuffy, 'venom pill' she's heard of it before, this is a poison that can only be used by the dignitaries of the Nu Tribe. Turning her head, she coldly eyes the man lying on the floor, pondering over the matter, she figures it all out. Instead of showing anger, she laughs, "You're already on the road to death, yet you want me to save you."

Very clever, Ye Li also laughs, "You have no other choice do you?"

Lightly sounding a heng sound, Gui Wan gives up on retching. Standing up, she overlooks Ye Li, speaking with a cold expression: "Within the Capital City I can turn my hand to conspire a cloud, and cover it up with the other hand to block the rain. Are you afraid I cannot find someone who can detoxify the poison?" What a joke, she is the Prime Minister Madam, not to mention that the Prime Minister had promised her, to overturn the Capital, with Lou Che's power, how hard can it be?

"But even if you overturn the entire Capital City, you still won't be able to find the antidote," Seeing the movement of Gui Wan's lips, he hurriedly speaks before her, "Waiting for you to find the people of the Nu, the poison would already have been activated. Besides, not everyone in the Nu Tribe would use or detoxify the 'venom pill'."

Knowing that he is speaking the truth, Gui Wan muses: "How do I know the potential pill you fed me just now, and it's not like it's a pill made from the decoction of ten powerful tonics."

The man is speechless, he suddenly extends his hand, and only by exhausting his strength, does he manage to take out an approximately one inch long silver stick from his waist belt. Placing it into his mouth, he gently blows into it.

When she hears no sound emitting, she was caught in a moment of puzzlement, when a kind of heart-breaking pain spreads from her stomach, painful to the point that Gui Wan had almost lost consciousness. Because her body cannot withstand the pain, she squats down, and the pain reaches her heart. She was unable to utter a single word, her hand clutching at her pained

heart, waiting for this bitter pain to pass. After approximately the time taken to drink a full pot of tea, the pain slowly fades. Gui Wan felt as though she went through that for a long time.

Once the pain had completely subsided, she slowly stands up, her heart secretly harbouring anger, she glares towards the Nu man, to find that he's lying there motionlessly, he can't be dead right?

Heart in panic, she slightly approaches him, he cannot die.

Looking at him closely, though his breathing is very weak, he has not yet died.

With a heart fuelled with hate, the cogs in her mind turns furiously fast, Gui Wan looks at the Nu man, hesitating to save him. To not save him, she must immediately go back to find her husband, make use of military forces, and figure out a way to find the Nu people to detoxify the poison, this way, there'd be another conflict with the Nu, but the war had only just ended some time ago, thinking back to street scenes of the commoners celebrating the end of the war, Gui Wan's heart couldn't bear to do this.

The other way is to save this Nu person, since the person's life is placed in her own hands anyway, she is not afraid of his regret. Based on her experience of judging people, the words said before he had fainted, is true, but to have her save him, she feels that her self-esteem will be damaged, after all she is being threatened, moreover her body has also received harm.

Thinking over it for a while, Gui Wan hatefully grits her teeth, deciding to save this Nu person.

The equilibrium between the choices is outweighed when, amongst the two choices, the second is seen as relatively easier to do.

However Gui Wan definitely isn't someone whose kindness is at a laughable level, she has never thought to return good for evil, therefore.....she most definitely would give this Nu person a piece of her mind.

Once she's clearly thought it all through, Gui Wan coldly looks at the unconscious Nu person, speaking with an extremely crisp voice, not only speaking to herself, but also speaking to the unconscious man: "You will regret making me save you. You also would not be leaving the Capital City alive."

Having said that, she very calmly ponders, how do I save him? With her one person's strength, she cannot achieve anything, looks like she has no choice but to use her status.

Walking to the end of the alleyway, she looks all around her, not one idler is around. Suddenly her eyes catches sight of a soldier coming from the end of the street, judging by his attire, it is a soldier from the Capital, secretly thinking, there's hope, she extends her hand to beckon the person over.

That little soldier comes close, wanting to roar out, who gave "him" so much courage, to dare order about soldiers.

A side of a golden pendant sways before him, the character "Lou" [楼] impressively carved on it, the soldier respectfully kneels down.

Gui Wan softly laughs, "You don't need to be nervous, I have two matters I need you to attend to....."

Full



CHAPTER FOUR

The Capital Is Very Small

The sun was shining, birds were singing and flowers fragrant, above in the obsolete loft room, there stands a young man, eyes looking out of the window, his face showing no expression, attentively looking into the distance, immersed in his inner thoughts.

The wind picks up.

Lifting the youth's hair as it blows, his sleeves billowing. Gradually getting irritated, Gui Wan takes out a silver ribbon from her sleeve, tying her hair high up. Knitting her brows, she looks into the distance, patiently waiting.

Suddenly a snow white pigeon flies in from the north, circling above the old loft room several times, and suddenly flaps its wings. The little dove calls out as it settles down on the handrail, its head turning side to side. Gui Wan walks up close, lowly mumbling: "It's finally here." Grabbing hold of the pigeon, she extends her hand and holds the capsule on the pigeon's foot, from it she extracts a note, thoroughly looking over the details, she becomes slightly disappointed.

Raising her head, she ponders a little, turning her body to enter the room.

The inside of the loft room looks shabby compared to its outer appearance, consisting of two rooms, the one outside is a simple study room, inside is the bedroom. Gui Wan steps into the bedroom, there, a maid sits by the bed.

Hearing the sound, Ling Long turns her head, her voice carrying disappointment as she speaks: "He still hasn't woken up yet."

Glancing over towards the bed, the Nu man lies there with his eyes closed, his breathing is calm, sleeping with an overly peaceful expression, making one think that he is only having an afternoon nap, and will wake up once a while has past.

He has clearly been unconscious for three days, why has he not waken up yet? Thinking back to two days ago, the physician had vowed to her, today he shall be waking up. It is already nearing dusk, yet there is not even the slightest hint of waking up soon, seeing his sleeping face, looking as though he's at complete peace, Gui Wan carries a trace of sarcasm in her laughter, at a time like this, he can still sleep so soundly......

Three days ago, she had swallowed the "venom pill", in order to search for the antidote, she had put the power of the Prime Minister Estate to full use, and even sent out investigators everywhere, however, the information gathered during these three days, from all over the place, was actually very little. Looking at the unconscious and unwilling to wake up person, she wonders, could it be that he is still the last of her hope?

Gently sighing, she says to the maid who is still sat beside the bed: "Ling Long, you go back first." Within these three days, it is Ling Long who has been rushing back and forth from here and the Prime Minister Estate, constantly delivering messages, and taking care of the patient, she must be exhausted.

"Lord Prime Minister is very worried about you." Ling Long gently reminds.

She doesn't understand why they must save this Nu man with unknown origin. Her way of doings things has always been done with a sense of propriety, people often say that she lives up to her name, a smart and well behaved smooth worker, but in reality, the one who is truly smooth and slick, is the young lady she has served for many years, never once has she seen her slip from her sense of propriety, so what exactly has gone wrong here?

Understanding what she is worried about, Gui Wan lets out a little laugh, how

could she have wanted to provoke such suspicion, but between life and death, she too cannot stand by and do nothing. This matter cannot be explained, if she tells Ling Long, then it will be stirring up a storm for no reason.

The corners of her lips hooks up, she smiles in a relaxed manner, "Don't worry, Ling Long." Seeing Ling Long be put at ease from her words, Gui Wan urges her, "Quickly go, go back and tell the caretaker, my orders cannot be known to others. Everything must be done in secret."

Ling Long answers with a word of yes, neatening up her outfit, she was just about to leave the loft room, when Gui Wan suddenly calls out to her again: "Ling Long, everything that's going on here, you cannot tell my husband, got it?"

Ling Long reveals a look of puzzlement, but seeing a face that's not willing to speak anymore, she can only nod her head compliantly and leave the lofthouse.

Seeing that she has left, Gui Wan sits down on the seat that was previously occupied, feeling the warmth that remains on it. Looking down at the bed, he has fallen deep into unconsciousness, but is looking a lot better than he did three nights ago.

Having eaten six hundred years old ginseng, of course he's looking good. Gui Wan secretly harbours great annoyance, she feeds him ginseng and ling zhi mushrooms, he feeds her a secret poison, this really is a difference between heaven and hell.

Just as she was about to stand up, she suddenly catches glimpse of the person's eyes gently twitching. Gui Wan's entire body freezes, then sits back down again, her eyes locked onto the person. Inside she was secretly filled with pleasant surprise: he's going to wake up.

Ye Li feels the piercing pain in his left arm, forcing him to completely wake up, his eyes slowly opens. Before his eyes was a blurred vision, and amongst such fuzziness, sits a person, who is it?

It's him, it's the ridiculously pretty young man from the back alley that night.

His head was overcome with dizziness, feeling everthing spin all around him, suddenly a hand supports his body, turning his head, the youngster was by his side, he asks him: "How long have I slept for?" His voice was scarily hoarse.

"Three days." The youngster's voice was pleasantly clear and crisp, completely different to the brave people of the Nu. He feels a strong sense of discomfort as though his throat was on fire, just when he was thinking this, a bowl of hot soup was brought in front of him, he raises his head to see a smiling face.

Extending his hand to take hold of the bowl, he felt a little guilty deep inside, he had poisoned him, yet he takes care of him with such hospitality. He takes in a big mouthful of soup, suddenly feeling his whole body warm up, his strength has also recovered, this must be ginseng soup, the people of the Nu only uses such precious ginseng when someone has contracted a severely incurable illness, yet the Celestial Empire just uses it as they please.

Seeing him stop drinking after that one mouthful, Gui Wan urges: "Does it not taste good?"

Gently, he gulps down the rest of the ginseng soup, Ye Li places down the bowl, gently saying to Gui Wan: "Thank you."

Gui Wan was startled, responding: "No need to be so polite." Seeing him gulp down a bowl of ginseng soup, his spirit getting much better, she can now ask him some questions, for some things, she had waited for three days already.

Without waiting for Gui Wan to speak, Ye Li suddenly asks first: "What's your name?" Don't know for what reason, he just really wants to know his name.

"Suo Ge Ta."

"What!" Ye Li loudly exclaims.

Seeing this man show such a big reaction to this name, exclaiming in surprise, Gui Wan had secretly got a good laugh inside, that day she had heard him mumble "Suo Ge Ta", and after falling unconscious, he would sometimes call out those three words, so she had wanted to test it out, didn't think his reaction would be so big.

Seeing him look at her with a touch of wonder, alarm, and even awe, she couldn't hold back her laugh, "I'm just joking with you, how could I have such a strange name, I'm called Yu Wan."

Only when he heard this reply, did Ye Li feel relieved, so it was just a joke, but why is it that he can feel the slightest bit of disappointment pouring out.

This person really is rather interesting, hearing that fake name, his face was rendered in shock, his expression going through three different changes, really is strange, telling him the real name, he appears to be slightly disappointed, looks like the people of the Nu are really naïve, thinking this, Gui Wan asks him: "My name, you know it now, what's your name then?"

He remains silent for a long while, just when Gui Wan thought he would not be answering, he suddenly curls his hand into a fist, placing it against his chest, reciting a line of the Nu language, and then turns his head, saying to Gui Wan: "I originally wasn't going to tell anyone here my name, but you saved my life, we Nu people value such graces the most......" Speaking up to there, he suddenly comes to a halt, rapidly glancing over at Gui Wan, "I'm called Ye Li."

"What!" This time it is Gui Wan who exclaims in surprise.

Although she exclaims quietly, Ye Li had already looked over to her with interest, his movements as fast as lightning, "What's wrong? You heard of this name before?"

Of course she heard of it. No wonder he had escaped from prison, no wonder the Capital City has been so heavily guarded these past three days, no wonder she had even heard that General Lin is personally leading the soldiers in search for the fugitive, turns out.....turns out he is the prince of the Nu.

Laughing to herself, her face showing no change, "I haven't heard of it before," Seeing him look as though he still doesn't believe her words, she adds, "It's just that the surname Ye has never been heard of in the Celestial Empire."

His heart was slightly put at ease, Ye Li's stern expression calms down, he does not want to kill someone because his name has revealed his identity, subconsciously, he does not want to wield a knife against this young man.

But this youngster mustn't be an average person right, for him to be able to safely hide him away for three days, this isn't something that's within the capability of the average people, thinking this, his mind was put on alert again, suddenly thinking of an important question, he asks: "Where is this place?"

"We're in the courtyard behind Lai Fu Restaurant." Gui Wan sees that Ye Li does not understand, and remembers that he is a person of the Nu, further saying, "This place is Bai Hua Street, it's not far from that alleyway."

At the mentioning of that alleyway, Ye Li frowns, "Why would we be here?" It's too insecure, to actually be in an area within the heart of the Capital City.

"This place is most safe." Seeing through his thoughts, Gui Wan's voice carried no fluctuations, explaining in a leisurely manner, "There's two reason for this, reason one, this place has already been searched through on the day you had escaped; reason two, if I had sent you to the remote outskirts that day, I'm afraid you would have already lost your life."

Seeing Ye Li nod his head in display of agreement, Gui Wan continues to speak: "Now that I have already saved you, you should also give me the antidote for the 'venom pill' right?" Having waited for three whole days, her patience is quickly wearing thin.

Appearing troubled as he looks at Gui Wan, Ye Li ponders for a moment: "I cannot give you the antidote."

.....

The atmosphere suddenly turns cold, both people gazing at the one another, in this moment of silence, both have their own worries, thier thoughts going through twist and turns, leading back to irritation.

Ye Li thinks: He cannot give him the antidote, he doesn't seem to be as weak as he appears, if he gives him the antidote, then maybe he would no longer help him. If he wants to leave the Capital, he still needs his help. As long as he has safely escaped the Capital City, he shall repay this favour from then onwards.

Gui Wan thinks: Him not willing to give the antidote, must mean that he wants her to aid him in escaping the Capital. Really have to inch forward and temporarily tolerate it. Once she gets the antidote, then he shall not even think of leaving the Capital City alive.

Thinking up to there, Ye Li sincerely speaks: "Yu, as long as I am able to leave the Capital, before that, I definitely cannot give you the antidote. You do not have to worry, as long as I don't blow the Dong Gu flute (Moving Valley Flute), the venom poison in your stomach shall never act up in your lifetime."

Gui Wan was not angry, continuing to gracefully smile: "Brother Ye Li should also rest assured, this little brother shall think of a way and safely send you out

of the city."

Both people exchange smiles, thus reaching an "agreement".

Since an unwritten agreement has been reached, Gui Wan is also relieved from the hidden danger of the poison acting up at any moment, within that little moment, it felt as though the big burden in her chest has been lifted. The people in the bedroom, calling each other brother, was also quite a pleasure, especially when Ye Li spoke of the scenery and humanities beyond the Great Wall, letting Gui Wan gain a lot of insights.

Suddenly thinking of something, unable to refrain from being curious, Gui Wan asks: "Brother Ye Li, this Suo Ge Ta, what exactly does it mean?"

Ye Li was just about to speak, when he suddenly sees Gui Wan's sparkling smile, the image of what happened in the alleyway that night, returning to his mind, he had mistaken this beautiful boy in front of him for a god, for a moment he is rendered speechless, unable to answer him.

Seeing that he is not answering, Gui Wan thought that she had committed a certain taboo within the Nu Tribe, saying: "Please do forgive for what happened before, I'm young and inexperienced, misappropriating the name of the Nu."

Thinking back to what just happened, Ye Li waves his hand, "It's nothing." His face calm, with a slight touch of seriousness, Gui Wan sees this, and is unable to say anything.

Another moment of silence, Ye Li reveals a troubled expression, Gui Wan was secretly curious, when Ye Li speaks: "In fact......you really suit this name." Saying that, his expression turns worse, as though he is blaming himself for something.

Hearing this, she was stupefied, and was just about to ask him what he meant, when a burst of rapid sounds interrupted their conversation.

Gui Wan's expression immediately changes, making eye contact with Ye Li, she points to underneath the bed, Ye Li understood her meaning, sitting up from the side of the bed and immediately rolled under the bed.

Seeing that he has rolled under, Gui Wan smooth out the sheets, and then calmly walks to the entrance, opening the doors.

As soon as the doors were opened, she came face to face with a pair of beautiful eyes, seeing him, Gui Wan could not help but to feel a little taken aback. That ice cold expression, those beautiful orbs, it is clearly the handsome youth who paid up for her three days ago. Besides the young man stands several soldiers, right when Gui Wan experienced a little moment of enlightenment, two soldiers jogs up, bowing to the cold youth by the door, they speak in unison: "General, there's no gain in the front hall."

So he is the young and talented, along with Lou Che, assisting the Emperor, with one civil, one military, General Lin. The moment Gui Wan figured out his identity, the moment she became aware of the current crisis.

Noticing that the other person is also looking at her in slight surprise, Gui Wan stays calm and collected, smiling as she greets: "Looks like the Capital is indeed very small."

They say extraordinary men would definitely have extraordinary encounters, does this point towards situations like this one, Gui Wan bitterly jokes.

Noticing the surprise in the opposition's eyes flash by, Gui Wan ponders a bit, thinking to herself, maybe this could be the perfect chance, to give Ye Li to General Lin, and then she can seek for a detoxifying solution from General Lin, she does not believe that Ye Li will be able to withstand the heavy punishments from the punishment division.

Just as she was thinking that, she suddenly catches glimpse of a silver glint under the bed, Gui Wan's heart was suddenly alarmed, she of course knew that that was Ye Li's flute, that day's unforgettable pain returns to her head, it was Ye Li reminding her not to betray their "agreement"!

She is caught in a dilemma now.

"So you're that remarkably famous General Lin, many thanks for that day." Heartily speaking to the opposition, Gui Wan reminds herself to remain composed.

Lightly nodding, Lin Rui En was momentarily speechless. Three days ago, the detained criminal of the Nu who had been sent into the Capital has escaped, he has since took charge for the search. The criminal has escaped in this area, and

he has already laid out all the traps^[1], yet has still hasn't been unable to catch the person, with three whole days, could Ye Li have disappeared into dust? He has searched through the entire Capital once, but still didn't manage to catch him, where exactly does the problem lie? Could there be a place they have passed by?

Today he can only lead people to search around again. Never did he think that he'd once again bump into this young man.

Could the Capital really be this small? Lin Rui En upon hearing these words of his, also feels puzzled all the same.

Why would he have remembered him? Is it because that day he had dressed wealthily, yet was unable to pay up his food expenses, hence leaving a deep impression on him?

Vaguely feeling that this isn't the right answer, Lin Rui En frowns, saying: "I am hunting down the escaped fugitive. These past few days, have you seen an injured man of the Nu Tribe?" His voice as icy cold as his looks.

Of course she has seen him, in fact he's under the bed right now.

"No, these past few days I have only been staying in this house, and haven't stepped out." Gui Wan spoke with such sincerity.

Slightly nodding his head, Lin Rui En looks around the inside of the house, "We have a regular course of official duties to go through, you wouldn't mind me looking around inside right?"

"Of course not." Gui Wan's voice was brisk, but inside she holds hidden nervousness.

Leading him inside the house, hundreds of thoughts flashes through Gui Wan's brain, unable to find a solution to satisfy both sides, she turns her head and sees Lin Rui En's steady face of indifference, and suddenly thinks of something. Turning around with a captivating smile, she says: "General, thanks for your help the day before, this little brother shall always bear it in mind."

Lin Rui En deeply frowns, how could a man have such a smile? Could it be because of his pretty appearance, such a delicate smile on his face, is able to express a look of such beauty and innocence.

Not saying anything in response, he suddenly realises that the other person had already invited him into the room, Lin Rui En's walking pace slows.

Seeing him halt there, Gui Wan extends her hands to hold onto him, leading him to the bed and points to the only stool at the bedside, "General, please sit."

If anyone else had suddenly extended their arms towards him, he would grasp onto their wrist mercilessly, but the moment this youngster had naturally extended his hand to hold onto him, he had only slightly hesitated. Before he could show any reaction, the hand had already taken hold of him, he was just about to throw off his hand, when he could only feel something gentle and delicate on his arm, looking down, slender fingers, a delicate white.

His mind was struck with shock, this is clearly a pair of female's hand.

Composing himself, he sees "him" pointing at the only stool within the room, and makes the sudden move to throw off "his" hand, looking at the stool, he also doesn't know whether he should sit down or not.

Seeing Lin Rui En stare at the stool, Gui Wan's heart starts pounding, she is indeed taking an extreme risk right now, to invite Lin Rui En to the bedside stool, really is because of an ulterior motive, she needs to make a gamble on this, gamble on making Lin Rui En sit at the only blind spot.

But seeing him stare at the stool right now, could it be that he discovered something?

Lin Rui En hesitates for a moment, seeing "him" look over, appearing to be somewhat uncomfortable, he switches his thoughts and thinks, maybe "he" is disguising as man due to some difficulties, so why should he expose "him", thinking that, he sits down.

Gui Wan secretly lets out a sigh of relief, looking over towards the door, four soldiers have already entered house starting their search.

The more she watches on, the deeper she frowns, in the end Gui Wan could not hold back her grumbles: "How could they be so rough." The soldiers searching outside were rummaging around, their hands, not even the least relaxed.

Lin Rui En also watches the soldiers searching under his lead, once he takes

into consideration that "he" is actually female after all, the soldiers' actions also appears rough in his eyes, as he thinks this, he hears "him" quietly voice out complains, unable to hold back his tongue, he says: "Act more gently."

The four soldiers outside raise their heads simultaneously, turning to look at Lin Rui En, seeing that that chilly expression of his, they couldn't help but to look towards each other, all of them thinking: General sure is acting weird today. Softening their actions, they continue their search with caution.

Very quickly, they have managed to thoroughly search the outer area. The four soldiers walk up to Lin Rui En, respectfully standing there, awaiting the General's orders.

Typically speaking they need to also search within the house. Raising his head to quickly glance over at "him", Lin Rui En appears to look hesitant, his eyes scans the place, and finally speaks: "I have looked around here, there's nothing out of the ordinary."

Hearing his words, Gui Wan was pleasantly surprised, she has finally managed to fool this cold young General, thinking this, she looks at him, meeting his eyes, but he actually looks away first.

Seeing the four soldiers withdraw, Lin Rui En was just about to get up and leave, when Gui Wan suddenly asks: "General, the Nu fugitive you have just spoke of, is someone from the Nu right?"

Nodding his head, Lin Rui En looks at "him" doubtfully, not knowing why "he" is asking this.

Gui Wan explains: "I'm just thinking, if General is going to search around like this, maybe you won't be getting any results from doing so, if it's like that, then lay out an ambush on the road to the Nu, perhaps this would be of use."

Didn't think that having listened to that comment, Lin Rui En looks at "him" with a look containing deeper meaning, before turning around and heading out.

Although she did not hear him say anything in reply, Gui Wan knows that he has indeed listened to her, her heart filled with happiness, as long as he listens to her, then she has already succeeded in half of her plan.

Seeing the group of people, and General Lin walk ahead without looking back,

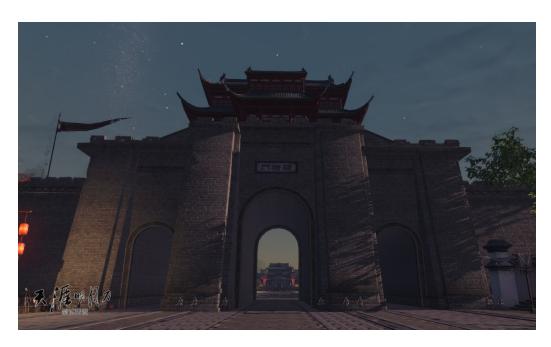
Gui Wan slowly closes the doors, her entire body rests against the door, letting out a big sigh, she turns her head towards the bed, saying: "You can come out now."

Slowly crawling out from under the bed, Ye Li observes Gui Wan in a strange manner, "Why did you suggest for him to block my road home?"

Hearing his dissatisfaction, Gui Wan smiles, speaking calmly: "In doing this, only then would you have the chance to go home."

Seeing his look of puzzlement and doubt, Gui Wan assures: "Don't you worry, I'll slowly explain to you."





The skies were very dark, with no moonlight, the shadows of two people slowly walks out from the Northern Gates of the Capital City, by the look of their leisurely pace, it seems as though they are out on a stroll, strolling in such a dark, moonless and windy night.

Observing the surroundings whilst slowly walking, Gui Wan was relaxed and carefree, turning her head, she sees that within the darkness, the other person is displaying a burning strong and cautious look in his eyes. she laughingly says: "You don't need to be this serious do you?"

Seeing such a carefree smile on his face, Ye Li says: "We people of the Nu, as long as we are not at home, we will maintain an alert stance."

"That is indeed a good habit." The tone that said those words were bland, as though happy, as though helpless, as though sighing.

Hearing other implications in his voice, Ye Li turns to look at him, but the skies were too dark, no matter what, he cannot see the look on his face clearly, the same towards his inner thoughts.

Within a blink of an eye they had reached the city gates, looking up to the skies, Gui Wan halts in her steps, "Okay, we're here."

Also stopping, Ye Li looks towards the city gates where only two people stands, questioning: "Is this really going to work out right?"

"Of course. Right now, General Lin is in the east waiting for you with layers of traps, because that is the direction you will head in. Right now, you shall head out from the north, this way you wouldn't run into them, besides, although it is the longer way around, but if you steer your way from the Feng City in a month's time, then you should still be able to return to the Nu Tribe. Whether it is better to lose your life, or better to take the longer route home, I believe you should know best."

Having said so much in one breath, Gui Wan did not give him time for a breather, continuing to speak: "Today you can leave from here. If you don't leave now, then you won't get another chance."

Attentively looking at Gui Wan, Ye Li nods his head.

"Now then....." Gui Wan smiles, reminding him, "I have fulfilled my side of the agreement....."

Silently, Ye Li rolls up his sleeve, seeing Gui Wan defensively step backwards, he laughs: "Don't misunderstand, actually, I have raised this poison with my blood, the antidote is my blood."

Looking at him, Gui Wan suddenly understands, her anger building up inside, had she have known that the antidote has been lying in front of her for three days, would there be any need for all this trouble?

She watches on with a smile as Ye Li takes the knife and cuts a small wound on his wrist, the blood slowly flowing out. Gui Wan was met with another headache, forget this problem of needing to drink his blood, right now there isn't even any bowls or anything of that sort, could it be that she needs to go up and drink from him?

"What's wrong?" Ye Li asks in puzzlement, not understanding why he isn't drinking the antidote, and even showing a troubled face, shouldn't he be delighted to be able to detoxify the poison?

Forget it, life is more important than anything, thinking this, Gui Wan walks up, drinking the blood from his wound.

Ye Li freezes, the moment Gui Wan gently closes in, a limp and numb feeling spreads out from his wounds, the wound no longer feeling pain, only feeling his entire body slightly heat up.

What was he thinking, even if the other person is an outstanding beautiful person, in the end he is still a man. These past two days, forget having repeatedly see a flash of a god in him, but to actually feel moved by him, Ye Li-ah Ye Li, what exactly is wrong with you?

Secretly struggling with his inner self, he could no long hold back, towards the young man who's drinking the blood with his head lowered, with black silk-like hair, white as jade skin and chin, a beautifully graceful neck, and also.....

Suddenly grabbing hold of the youngster's arm, Ye Li tingled with excitement, "You.....you're not a man?"

Suddenly grabbed by the arm, Gui Wan feels the pain and raises her head, looking at Ye Li in shock, puzzlement, joy, hearing his question, she was surprised for a moment, but calmly answers: "That's right, not like I ever said I'm a man."

Seeing Gui Wan's calm expression, the blood still not cleaned off her lips, within the darkness, she reveals an appearance that looks even more like the brilliance of ripe peaches and plums. Ye Li's heart suddenly bursts into cheerfulness, little bits of joy accumulate, causing him to let out a sound of hearty laughter.

Gui Wan looks at him as though she's looking at a lunatic, reminding: "There's soldiers up in the city towers."

Once she's said that, like a testament to her words, two gate watching soldiers runs up from city gates, Ye Li doesn't even bother looking, shining more brightly as he looks at Gui Wan, "You are indeed Suo Ge Ta....."

The two soldiers closes in and Ye Li makes a sudden move, once again acting

with the sensitivity of a leopard, drawing out the opponent's waist-side sword, with a swift move, neat and tidy, both soldiers could not even utter a single word, and were sent to report to the netherworld.

Coldly watching the opposition's actions, Gui Wan's eyes reveals a hint of mysterious treachery.

Ye Li who had just dealt with the two soldiers, turns around, placing the sword on his own waist side, and strides towards Gui Wan.

He had just killed, feeling that his body seems to have the bloody smell wafting around him, Gui Wan backs away.

Quickening his pace to close in on her, he grabs hold of Gui Wan's shoulders in one move, pulling her in front of him, with a look of joy, Ye Li mutters: "Suo Ge Ta, you are Suo Ge Ta.

Simply unable to understand what nonsense he is speaking of, she summons up all her strength to push him away, her voice coldly reminding: "If you're still not going to leave, it'll be too late."

He did not care about being pushed away, but her following words snapped him awake, letting go, he composes himself as he looks at Gui Wan, saying word by word: "I will come back."

Saying that, he immediately turns, and runs towards the stairs by the city gates. Whilst doing so, he seems to have thought of something, bringing his figure to a halt, turning his head, he once again makes a commitment to Gui Wan: "I will come back, Suo Ge Ta."

Gui Wan says nothing, watching as his figure gradually disappears into the darkness, she then hears the sounding of the city gates, suppose he's left the city now. The look on her face turns treacherous, a scornful smile suddenly floats to the surface of her face as she lowly speaks: "So the Nu people remains vigilant at all times?" Lowly letting out a laugh, she raises her hand and waves, within the originally empty darkness, two shadows leaps out in a blink of an eye. The two figures that have been summoned before her are clearly skilled masters.

Behind her, the two people stands shoulder to shoulder. One of them speaks with a dull, hoarse voice: "We've already notified General Lin. Leaving from here,

there's only death waiting for him."

Looking into the darkness, Gui Wan shows no expression. She gently speaks, as though she's speaking to the people behind her, but also seems to be speaking for herself to hear: "You can't even go back alive, how can you come back?" She pauses, as though she cannot bear it, softly explaining, "This is really cruel, who told you to be of a different race? Such a helpless fate, ah....."

No one responds to her. There is only the wind that picks up, carrying away her voice in the darkness, sinking into the immensity between the city gates.

[1] **To lay out all the traps** is expressed in Chinese, with the phrase **bù xià tiān luó dì wǎng /** 布下天罗地网 which translates to **prepared nets from above and laid out snares below.**

I'm sure you guys already realised this by now, but this novel is so centred on the female protagonist Gui Wan, that you can go for long periods of time in which some of the male leads don't make an appearance. At least for this chapter, we got a bit of General Lin ^__ his character is definitely a fan favourite amongst the potential love interests for Gui Wan, cold on the outside but so nice and warm on the inside, it's no wonder why readers love him so much hehe. As for Ye Li, he is one hell of a frustrating character, so arrogantly self-centred, only caring about his own wants and not giving a damn about how others feel, we do gain a little understanding as to where he got such personality from in later chapters, not that it makes me dislike him any less. Lou Che...I shall give my first judgement on after the next chapter, he's the one that receives mixed feelings amongst readers, some of you like him, some of you dislike him, some of you may or will be confused as to how you feel about him......

Anyways, I know the last chapter was pretty short, so I hope you enjoyed another long chapter, and if you think this long, wait till the next one, I'm going to have to separate it into two posts

Part 1



CHAPTER FIVE

The Imperial Palace's Grand Banquet (Part One)

Autumn passes, with spring flowers and wild cuckoos peacefully maintaining the otherness within the earthly realm.

The autumn wind blows, and although the view of lotus flowers in the pond has long gone, with the autumn air gradually thickening, the maple leaves floats down onto the pond, bringing with it its own distinctive charms, a mass of scarlet floating above the water, occasionally making little turns. When she had returned last night, she did not notice the fall of the maple leaves, could it be that they have fallen overnight? Unaware that the flowers of yesterday have already withered away, today other worries occupies her mind.

She had done the right thing right, it wasn't wrong of her? He is originally the enemy of the Celestial Empire, had she let the tiger return to the mountain, perhaps more people will be put to sacrifice in future, if thinking this can calm her uneasy heart in the slightest bit, she shall continue to tell herself this, she is not in the wrong.

"Gui Wan." That gentle, considerate voice calls out from nearby, such warming voice, can only be her husband.

Slowly turning her head, she sees Lou Che walk in from the corridor, as though

he was revealing himself in the mist, suddenly, she thinks back to these past few days, all that has happened really feels like a dream, like smoke like mist. A smile floats to the surface of her face, "My Lord Husband, back from the court's assembly?"

Such illusive smile, was the first he had seen. Returning last night when it was almost sunrise, the first thing she says when she sees him was filled with loss and exhaustion: "I'm back, so tired~." He doesn't know what she had been through these past few days, she says nothing, he asks nothing, although vaguely knowing that she had used quite a number of spies and guards, he had already promised her, her matters, he will not delve in, he needs only to cover for her.

Filled with tenderness, Lou Che picks up the neglected bowl that was left on the corridor, seeing that its contents were left completely untouched, he inquires: "Why are you not eating the soup, does it not suit your taste?"

"It's I who doesn't have the appetite," Gui Wan smiles, the look in her eyes flickering, lips slightly parted, looking as though she's struggling with something. After a long while, she asks: "Did anything big happen in the imperial court."

He looks at Gui Wan in surprise, responding with a hint of wonder and exploratory, "I didn't know you were also interested in the state affairs."

Hearing this, Gui Wan says nothing. Lou Che watches her, he just gets the feeling that the her today, has many words that she has yet to say, her entire person appearing to be at loss, contradictory, there's also this sense of unspeakable melancholy, unable to bear this, also pitying the look of confusion in her eyes, he gently says: "Something big did indeed happen in the imperial court," Noticing Gui Wan reveal a hint of interest in his words, he continues to speak, "It is reported that General Lin was hunting down the Nu's prince yesterday. In the end, he had let him slip away."

Gui Wan lifts her head, confirming one more time: "Slipped away?"

"En, was originally already a bird in the net, who would have known that halfway there, the Nu people charged out in rescue, allowing him to escape." His words were not spoken without regret.

Gui Wan gathers up her mixed feelings within a moment, the vivid happenings of yesterday in her head. In fact, she is not a cold blooded person, so she too felt

perplexed, concerned, conflicted. Ye Li is the enemy of her homeland, is the Nu's important commander, his death is the wish of countless people within the Celestial Empire, what she did yesterday is completely correct, but hearing that he had escaped just now, the big burden in her heart has dissolved. She did not kill him. Perhaps subconsciously, she was also hoping that she did not indirectly, or even directly, got him killed, hoping that she did not get involved in this kind of foul wind and rain of blood (bloodshed).

Shallowly, faintly, she laughs, the gloominess in her heart, swept away, reaching out, she takes hold of the bowl of soup, slowly starting to eat.

Seeing that she has suddenly got her appetite back, the hint of melancholy in her between her brows gone, Lou Che's heart was also put at ease, "It's already cold, call for the servants to heat it up at bit."

"It doesn't matter." Gui Wan replies with her mouth filled with soup.

Perhaps it is because of the relaxation in her mood, the moderately cooled soup also tastes good in her mouth, sighing in satisfaction, she finds that Lou Che is still standing in the corridor, and calls out in surprise: "Lord Husband, what's the matter?"

Lou Che slowly walks up to the edge, sitting across from Gui Wan. He looks at Gui Wan, wanting to say something but says nothing.

She clearly feels Lou Che's eyes look past her. In fact, he was looking at the pond filled with scatters of red leaves behind her. Seeing the warmth in his eyes, Gui Wan's heart turns soft at the sight, "Lord Husband, did you think back to something?"

"Perhaps so." Lou Che is always carrying that smile, like that of the spring breeze in March, making people feel fresh and mild, "Gui Wan, the first day of next month, we need to make a trip to the palace."

First day of next month? Isn't that in five days? Gui Wan asks: "Is there a joyous event to celebrate in the palace?"

Lou Che nods, confirming her guesses, "The Jing Yi Hall (scenery viewing hall) is completed, and the young prince is now two years old. The Emperor will be holding a banquet to celebrate these two joyous events at the same time."

Jing Yi Hall? Such a familiar name......where has she heard it before? Suddenly thinking back to that day at the restaurant, the middle-aged scholar has mentioned this with a tone of irony, a hall built for Consort Ying. In sudden realisation, Gui Wan looks towards Lou Che, "Do I also need to attend?" Just thinking of the possible scenarios that's going to play out on the day, her blood freezes.

To accompany Lou Che to see Consort Ying, it is just too strange.

"Of course, you are my wife." His gentle voice sounding very definite.

Hearing his words, Gui Wan was speechless, keeping watch of Lou Che's calm face that reveals no trace of mood swings, she suddenly asks: "Wouldn't it be conflicting?"

Raising his brows, Lou Che asks back: "What conflict?"

Gui Wan places down the bowl, looking out to the skies as she organises her thoughts, she gently says: "Lord Husband is the court's Grand Secretary, with authority overflowing the imperial court, in this world what is there that you don't understand? Clearly knowing that righteous matters, you should do, but what if you clearly know it is right but you would regret doing it in future, would you do it?"

Seeing the seriousness in her eyes, her softly spoken tone, Lou Che slightly felt at loss, intuitively asking: "How could there be a matter that you clearly know is right, but would regret doing it in future?"

"Haven't you already done it before?" Gui Wan says, slyly laughing.

Freezing on the spot, Lou Che looks towards Gui Wan with sharp eyes, seeing such an intense look from him for the first time, Gui Wan seemingly innocent, continues to speak: "The Emperor is the lord, Husband is the subject, imperial power is the key link, romantic feelings are frequent, is this not a conflict?"

Lou Che was dumbfounded, deeply scrutinising Gui Wan, under this sort of inspection of his, Gui Wan freely laughs and stands up, she lightly waves her sleeves, turning around and heads out of the porch, very casually throwing aside a few more words: "It truly is the players holding the pawns ah"."

Understanding that the meaning behind her words is pinpointing something

else, Lou Che gets a little angry, the problems that he has purposely been avoiding has suddenly been brought in front of him, he was also a little angry at the figure like light clouds and soft wind, towards the leaving figure, he responds: "The one who wordlessly watches the game of chess is the true lord."

Hearing his words, the figure does not stop, continuing to walk out. Gui Wan secretly thinks to herself, who told them to drag her along to watch this game of chess, Consort Ying, Lou Che, her, all of whom originally had their own chessboards to play with, but now, she just had to have been dragged into this one chessboard by them, she too has been forced into this by fate, however, the great fortune within this misfortune, is that she is not the one placing down the pawns.



A building every five steps, a pavilion every ten steps, the roofs connected, turning out to look like there is no end in sight, as though trapped within the red-tiled courtyard, Gui Wan couldn't help but to sigh, the magnificence within the palace is a lot better than she had imagined.

"Really is an excessive waste of luxury." Gui Wan says, as though she was sighing. Her voice is accompanied only by the sound of the carriage's spinning wheels.

Hearing her quiet voice, Lou Che explains: "The late Emperor loved the beauty of luxury, so the palace has gone through some renovations." His voice also seems to carry a hint of melancholy.

Turning to face Lou Che, her eyes showing no emotion, only carrying an indifferent smile, "I presume Jing Ye is also as luxurious."

Lou Che says nothing, smiling as he draws the carriages' curtains, very gently giving her a light hug, not responding to her comment, he says: "Don't catch the

chill like this, you can easily catch a cold." Unfamiliar with such intimacy, Gui Wan who had originally wanted to push him away, hears those words, and slightly relaxes.

Whilst both people were occupied with their own thoughts, the horse carriage stops. The sound of string instruments, the sound of laughter, the sound of liveliness passes through the curtains and travels inside, bewitched by these sounds, Gui Wan could also feel the excitement surging up from within, hearing the reporting officer loudly call out: "Prime Minister Lou and Madam has arrived." The seat beside her was empty, Lou Che had already gotten off the horse carriage, Gui Wan moves her body a little bit, and was just about to follow after him, when the curtains were lifted, a hand extended in front of her, her eyes looks up, the originally lively palace, filled with extravagantly dressed officials and their female partners, all had their full attention on them.

Humbly smiling, she takes hold of Lou Che's extended hand, slowly descending from the horse carriage. Amongst the crowd, there appears to be some who were alarmed and panicky, recovering themselves, several officials immediately surrounds them. Towards Lou Che they are full of flattery and bootlicking, officials' words are empty words, one after the other, adding lies to a pile of nonsense. Watching them with their hypocritical fawning countenance, Gui Wan laughs mockingly inside, but was also a little startled: So this is power? It truly is a ubiquitous power ah~.

It is during this moment of wave after wave of worshipping officials, a sudden glance from the corner of the eyes, reveals that there are still people standing in the left corner, remaining firmly motionless, so there are still people who do not fear power. To satisfy her curiosity, Gui Wan eagerly looks over, and immediately receives a shock, standing there, with a tall and graceful posture, if not General Lin Rui En who else could it be?

Today, General Lin is dressed in a body of white Confucianism robe, the cold air around him feels different because of his clothing, looking gentle and refined, just from looking at his appearance, who would have known that he is a warlord with tremendous prowess on the battlefield? He stands by the side, surrounding him were also some members of the court, but the majority of them were military commanders. Don't know whether it is her misconception, Gui Wan

feels as though he is also paying attention to this side.

Finally done dealing with the pleasantries and greetings of the big crowd, they wait for the people around them to disperse a bit, Gui Wan feels slightly fatigued, could this be the imperial palace's banquet? Hypocrisy, extravagance, with an atmosphere of luxurious wastefulness.

Noticing her strange demeanour, Lou Che quietly asks: "Gui Wan, are you tired?" His heart ached to see her looking worn out.

Turning to him with a smile, Gui Wan teases: "Lord Husband, the banquet hasn't even started yet."

Lou Che was stunned, he lets out a bright laughter, attracting the attention of some officials who once again looks over at them.

"Truly a woman of peerless elegance." In the corner, a man with a tall and strong built, dressed in military robes, watches on as he comments. Everywhere is lively within Jing Ye, there is only this place, where only four or five people stands around Lin Rui En, the one who spoke is Feng Luo Cheng who stands before him.

The tall and slim man who stands on the left, begrudgingly says: "Folks like us struggle through life and death at the borders, yet these people who usually only know how to show off their literary skills, stays in the Capital and lives a happy life. Look at that Madam Lou, old me has lived for so long, and have never seen such a beautiful woman before."

The current Emperor favours civil matters over military, this is known to the world. Military officers within the imperial court does not get promoted as fast the civil officers, their treatment also cannot compare to that of civil officers. All the frontier troops more or less holds feelings of resentment deep down in their hearts.

"General Zhou, watch your words, what place do you think this is."
Reprimanding him is the middle aged scholar accompanying General Lin by his side, he is a military advisor, known for always being able to come up with a hundred of strategies as well his great foresight, his seniority in the army has been preserved, so for him to reprimand someone like that, even the tall and slim man will keep his mouth shut.

Turning around, he sees the unfathomable look on Lin Rui En's face, letting out a small sigh, he says: "General, I believe with your eyes, you too should have recognised that Madam Lou. It can be considered that we have had the pleasure of meeting her once before."

Not saying anything in response, Lin Rui En turns a deaf ear, continuing to display that icy cold look of indifference.

The military advisor did not think rudely of him, continuing to speak: "Didn't think she is Madam Lou." These words spoken didn't seem to be his, instead it was said on Lin Rui En's behalf, Lin Rui En knits his brows together, about to say something. Right at this moment, he notices Lou Che lower his head, his expression gentle as he says something, Gui Wan turns her head and sweetly smiles. Upon seeing this, Lin Rui En freezes, his brows knitting together even more, forgetting whatever he was about to say.

Seeing him like this, the military advisor also frowns, lamenting: "Beauties are all disasters."

Hearing his words, Lin Rui En didn't even get the chance to react, when the tall and slim man besides him has already spoken up: "Didn't think that Military Advisor Lu has also taken a liking to that beauty." He pauses for a moment, seeming to have thought of something, he speaks again: "This cannot do, Military Advisor Lu, your child is already at the age qualified to enter the battlefield. For you to think of such a young beauty, this is unjust to Madam. I'd say, such a beautiful young lady, seems to match our General quite well."

Once he had said that, he even let out a snicker or two, as though he felt his own idea wasn't bad.

"Shut up." Lin Rui En scolds, "What nonsense are you speaking?"

The people nearby also turns their heads, everyone there had only just seen this frost-like youth reveal a look of anger for the first time. The tall and slim man freeze on the spot, not knowing how he should respond. Everyone else also appears to be shocked by Lin Rui En's expression.

Having just scolded, he immediately felt a sense of regret, these people are all brothers who he had fought through life and death with on the battlefields, yet he was unable to keep his emotions in check. Just now, he doesn't know why,

but he just couldn't withstand such crazy talk that carried wishful thinking, severely interfering with his emotions. From the corner of his eyes, he sees the military advisor's knowing expression, and once again another round of irritation rises within. Looking away, he just happens to meet eyes with Gui Wan's surprised yet studying expression, he quickly turns away, pretending he didn't see it.

In this moment of Lin Rui En's endless irritability, an ink blue figure stands in front of the hall, calling out from the top of his lungs: "His majesty the Emperor, Empress, and Lady Consort Ying has arrived—"

Officials and their partners that filled up the entire hall, all bows down in greeting, the large hall falling into silence, only hearing the noise of footsteps walking in, following on is the modestly spoken "Forego the formalities—"

Gui Wan slowly raises her head, the Emperor stands in the middle of the large hall, a lady stood on each side of him. On the right, is the one who Gui Wan feels familiar yet unfamiliar towards, Consort Ying, and on the left should be the mother of the empire, the Empress. She had heard that within the palace, the one who is specifically opposing Consort Ying is the Empress, unable to hold back her curiosity, Gui Wan cannot help but to look over towards the Empress. The Empress is dressed in a lilac water sleeve robe, although she does not have such startling beauty like Consort Ying, she too has the eyes of a phoenix, clearly a delicate and beautiful woman, what's more rare is, within her temperament there is tranquillity, a sense of a kind of amiable yet unapproachable elegance.

As a fellow woman, Gui Wan also had to give it to her, secretly singing her praises, she is indeed deserving to be the mother of the empire.

Seeing from the corner of her eyes, that the Emperor has already sat down, Gui Wan also sits down at the first seat on the left hand side, accompanied by Lou Che.

The banquet had already been prepared, without the Emperor's command, no one dared to move. Gui Wan raises her head to look at the Emperor, who is completely different to the image she had of him. The Emperor has a handsome face, although he is nearing thirty years of age, presumably due to being pampered since young, he appears to have an elegant magnanimity, however,

what makes Gui Wan feel regretful is, the Emperor has no eagerness and vigour, when the current Emperor was Crown Prince it was because he was approachable and was loved by the people, but as the Emperor, such modest attitude would definitely be a great flaw.

Seeing the Emperor hold up the jade bottle, Gui Wan also holds up the white jade cup in front of her. In that moment, she didn't even get to hear what the Emperor had said, only hearing the people beside her reciting "Of peace and harmony" "A golden harvest of all five grains" "It is a rarely seen golden age since the beginning of a new reign" "The Emperor is ingenious" words of this sort. Looks like hypocritical flattery during occasions like this cannot be any more common, Gui Wan carries a mocking smile, whilst maintaining her grace and poise as she sits there......

"So this is Minister Lou's tender wife?" The words that have been travelling to her ear seems to have suddenly mentioned her, hearing this, she lifts her head, seeing the Emperor gracefully smile as he gazes over.

Next to her, Lou Che has already spoken: "Yes." Gui Wan nods her head with a smile, in indication.

The Emperor seems to be rather admiring, laughing as he praises: "Madam Lou's grace is unparalleled, along with Minister Lou, really a couple as fine looking as jade."

Hearing those words, Consort Ying and the Empress simultaneously set their line of sight on her. Gui Wan raises her head, just happening to meet eyes with Consort Ying, really is autumn water for pupils, but at this moment, her eyes carries the look of perplexity, tenderness, and even a hint of loath, there were also emotions that Gui Wan cannot understand nor define.

Seeing such eyes, even Gui Wan could feel a heavy stone set in her heart, abruptly looking away, she notices that the Empress was looking at her, her face carrying a smile, but also a look of complication.

Luckily at that moment, the Emperor had turned towards other senior officials, lifting the attention away from her. Gui Wan lightly breaths out.

Although she very well knew that today's banquet will have an underlying turbulence, but what she is facing right now, also carries the feeling of

something else. Gui Wan secretly pledges to herself, banquets like this must most definitely be prevented in future, really does harm your mentality, harm your spirits as well as harming your physical body.

Taking hold of the wine cup, she lightly takes a sip, using this action to hide away from several complex eyes. She doesn't dare to raise her head again, and looks over towards the seat perfectly in centre, making a point to look down a bit.

Sitting below the Emperor seems to be the Emperor's younger twin brother. Indeed, he and the Emperor looks somewhat similar, but their temperaments are utterly different. The Emperor is modest and gracious, whilst this Prince Duan is known for being cold and heartless, because he is merited for once saving the Emperor out of trouble, he appears to have gotten more domineering. Whilst she was studying him, Prince Duan seems to have noticed someone's gaze on him, turning his head to her, his eyes like that of an eagle, shooting over. Towards such callous eyes, Gui Wan was slightly startled, but smiles, and nonchalantly turns away.

Prince Duan sees her naturally looking away, and was actually rendered surprised for a moment. When he usually comes across such situations, other people would either submissively avoid his gaze, or be too scared to move, this woman is indeed different from others. This Lou Che, his luck is abnormally great, first he had the peerlessly beautiful Consort Ying, and later gets a wife with such exquisite elegance. The brilliant blessings offered to this world, he has pretty much taken half of it.

Without even looking over, she can feel the bursts of oppression omitted from Prince Duan. Turning her head to look below, these government officials who've been drinking, all attitudes will grow unrestraint, laughter converging into one, her heart bursts with irritation. Gui Wan tugs at Lou Che's sleeve, Lou Che slightly lowers his head, looking at Gui Wan in puzzlement.

"Lord Husband, Prince Duan's staring is bit too impolite, is it not?" Gui Wan says.

Hearing this, Lou Che looks up towards Prince Duan's direction, his face displaying a cold smile, eyes relaying a stern warning.

This smiling tiger, meeting eyes with Lou Che, Prince Duan's look turns more severe. Right now there is no need to oppose this Prime Minister, secretly cursing at him, he turns his face away.

Seeing such an expression from Lou Che for the first time, Gui Wan felt like she couldn't really adapt to this. The Lou Che she usually sees at home is generally as gentle as the spring breeze in March, it was her first time seeing such smile with a sword hidden within it, this could also be consider another side to him right? If not, within this you-cheat-me-I-cheat-you environment, how would he have been able to maintain his position of power.

Telling herself that she is overthinking too much, after all, the man beside her has promised, he will not cause her any harm. Since he will not harm her, why should she care about his tactics and methods?

Gui Wan who was silently absorbed in her own thoughts, was suddenly jolted awake by the sound of string instruments, and only then did she realise that the entertaining music and dance performances has already started. Raising her head to look over, the youthful dancing girls in front of the seats have started dancing to the tune, such light weighted movements, with gestures touching the hearts of people, be it serenity be it dance, be it fanning be it turning, the sound of string instruments is pleasant to listen to, the movements of the dancers is pleasant to watch. Within that moment, the hall turns hazy, looking as magical as a dream.

A while later, the music and dancing have come to an end. Hearing the reporting officer announce the hour, Gui Wan was taken aback. It has only been an hour. Could it be that she is passing a day like it is year (to be in deep anxiety), thus feeling as though the times are particularly hard to get through?

According to the reporting officer, the music and dance is only a short interlude of the banquet, the real entertainment would be performed after dinner. Gui Wan was dumbfounded, to organise such a grand scale banquet in celebration for the birthday of your two year old son, is this not a bit too extravagant? She later finds out that she was wrong, this banquet that is officially said to be a celebration for the young prince, is actually a celebration for the completion of Jing Yi Hall. To use the birthday of one's own child as a

front, in order to seek the favour of a woman, everything within this imperial palace seems to be blurred and incredibly unconceivable.

I just love how Gui Wan leisurely approaches this touchy topic of Lou Che's and then lesiurely walks away, only she can get away that Also I see that our General Lin here, has quickly become the favourite amongst you guys too, he's so awkward and cute here, and he doesn't even realise it hahaha. But now that the banquet has started within the imperial palace, you can be expecting some interaction between Lou Che and Yao Ying, which actually makes me start questioning Lou Che's "love" for her...I'll explain in the next half of the chapter, and that shall be posted before the end of this week ^_^

Part 2



CHAPTER FIVE

The Imperial Palace's Grand Banquet (Part Two)

The banquet was soon to diffuse, the Emperor, Empress and Consort Ying leaves first to take a short rest. After they left the scene, there was still another hour left, the majority of the officials starts to disperse, starting to head over to the newly built Jing Ye to take a good look around, the women of their families walking in twos and threes, officials talking with eloquence, all in all, the atmosphere was a lot more relaxed compared to when everyone were eating just now, bursts of laughter can be heard here and there.

Gui Wan felt rather bored, and during the dispersing of the banquet, Lou Che said he has important matters to discuss with the Emperor, immediately leaving after. Now that she is left all alone, how is she to kill an hour's worth of time? At the blink of an eye, she sees some of the other women gathering together to chat, some fluttering around like butterflies as they admire the flowers, she subtly sighs, it's a shame that she doesn't usually chat with any of the madams of senior officials, otherwise she wouldn't be bored to death right now.

Just sitting here would be inappropriate of her, Gui Wan stands up, thinking that it is better to wander around, admire this newly constructed palace hall,

otherwise, she may even forget the purpose of entering the palace in first place.

The structure of Jing Ye is almost no different from the other halls, golden magnificence, not even a few steps in and Gui Wan was already sick of it, thinking to herself, if the Emperor wants to seek the favour of Consort Ying, how could he be so unoriginal? Turning here turning there, she has already wandered faraway from the crowd, something that she too was unaware of. When she finally returned to the right state of mind, she was already entering the back courtyard of Jing Ye, here the lighting is scattered, completely different to the brightly lit large hall, looking towards the garden, Gui Wan freezes on the spot.

The lotus pond, maple leaves, corridors, are actually exactly the same as the Prime Minister Estate, even the red leaves floating on the surface of the pond is no different, virtually misguiding her to believe she has returned to the Prime Minister Estate.

Her heart struck with shock, for Gui Wan, walking around this pond feels completely different to her usual stroll back at home, her current mood at this moment is rather heavy. Thinking of Consort Ying's implications of doing this, Gui Wan slightly breaks out in cold sweat. If this matter is known to a conscientious person, once exposed, it is practically a great sin, the consequences of such crime can bring calamity to the nine grades of relations^[1]. Composing herself, she thinks over it again, even if the skies falls down, she still has Lou Che to prop it up, so what is there for her to be afraid of?

With mixed feelings, she continues to walk, she does not know if it has been purposely arranged like this, but the back courtyard actually has not a single guard nor palace maid in sight. Slightly settling her heart, Gui Wan grew a little curious, could this entire garden really be the same as the one in the Prime Minister Estate? Thinking of the jade steps by the pond that she usually loves to stay at, don't know whether there'd be one here, thinking this, Gui Wan strides deep into the garden.

Walking up to the very edge of the lotus pond, there is indeed the jade steps. At this moment, Gui Wan really has no choice but to give it to this Consort Ying, looks like she is yet another love-struck fool.

Having just confirmed her own speculations, she had just wanted to turn back,

but the sound of footsteps can already be heard from behind her, Gui Wan was surprised, all this time there had been not a single soul in sight, who could have walked into this garden at this time?

Taking a quick glance with a turn of her head, approaching from afar is actually Lou Che and Consort Ying!

Gui Wan's mind blanks out for a second, she had wanted to greet them, but doesn't know how to speak up, noticing that the two people have no one besides them, the atmosphere also appears to be a bit strange, to come out during such time, wouldn't it just be too weird? Switching to another thought, she bends her body to hide behind the fake rockery next to the jade steps, at this moment, she was fortunate that this place is made to look exactly like home, hiding here, she most definitely wouldn't be found.

"Lady Consort Ying, why exactly have you brought this subject here?" Lou Che calls out to Consort Ying, his tone carrying estrangement.

That beautiful face holds a look of hidden bitterness, Yao Ying turns around, directly looking at Lou Che. This beloved man of hers, to actually use such cold voice towards her, to call out to her in such an estranged way, causing her heart to tighten in pain, her voice bringing tears as she speaks: "Do you not recognise the place before your eyes?"

How could he not recognise it? Lou Che continues to speak emotionlessly: "This is the newly built Jing Ye."

"No," Yao Ying strains, her voice sounding even more sad and dreary, "This is not Jing Ye, this is not......" Her hand points towards the garden — pointing over, she says in a crying tone: "That is the lotus pond I love most, the lotus pond you made; that is the corridor I love most, the corridor you made; that is the jade steps I love most, the jade steps you made......" Her words can no longer form any sounds, Yao Ying sobs incessantly.

Seeing Yao Ying weep so sorrowfully in front of him, a scene like that of a pear blossom bathed in $rain^{[2]}$, Lou Che stands frozen, seized by a sudden impulse, an image of Gui Wan's face floats before his eyes, both are women equally as beautiful as the other, yet how could there be such a big difference between them personality wise? Yao Ying looks glamorously beautiful on the outside, but

is soft on the inside; Gui Wan looks elegantly beautiful on the outside, but inside......inside, she should be considered carefree and easy-going right?

"What are you thinking.....?" Yao Ying feels a burst of panicking heartbeats, seeing Lou Che appear absentminded just now.

Composing himself as he looks at Yao Ying, Lou Che lets out a sigh, gently saying: "Ying-er, do you know what you are doing? This is the imperial palace. There are many eyes and ears, you must always be cautious, if anyone sees you like this, it will give rise to an impending fatality."

Hearing his change of addressment, Yao Ying's heart slowly calms, softly speaking: "I am just anxious, today seeing you.....you treat Yu so well, I felt too heavy-hearted, that's why....." (Note: Yu is Gui Wan's surname)

Brows knitting together, Lou Che responds saying: "Gui Wan is also the wife you have found for me, what exactly do you want me to do?" His heart greatly troubled.

Slightly stunned, Yao Ying reveals a smile that looks worse than crying, "That's right, it is I who found her for you. I had originally thought, if I cannot stay by your side, then I should find you a woman who is no less than myself to be your wife, but.....but seeing it today, I could not even refrain my jealousy.....good heavens, how despicable I am, even I loathe myself." Both hands masking her face, Yao Ying's tears once again steams down uncontrollably.

Back then when she was entering the palace, she had sincerely wanted for Lou Che to get a great wife, thinking of the stunning glimpse of Yu Gui Wan at Hong Fu Temple, she immediately asked for a marriage grant, but what pained her heart at the time, was that she cannot let go......cannot let go of the man, as gentle as jade, in front of her. That is why on his wedding night, she had summoned him into the palace, doing every means possible to keep him there, when she was being bullied by other imperial concubines within the palace, he would stay by her side to protect her, therefore she does not retaliate, and would rather rely on him to protect her, everyone think she is weak, but how could they know her ulterior motives?

As long as she is vulnerable within the palace, he shall forever stay by her side, so she does not mind, does not mind harming herself, in exchange, he will not be

able to let go of this attachment.

The strong feeling of sorrow that is pouring out from Yao Ying's body, even Gui Wan could feel it, causing her heart to also feel slightly sad, just how heavy of a feeling it is.

Lou Che says nothing, and could only look at Yao Ying. Just when did it start to become like this, this woman's body has been tied up, shrouded in sorrow and melancholy. Letting out a sigh, he takes out a handkerchief from him sleeve, and very gently wipes away the tears of Yao Ying who had already become like a child flooded in tears.

As his breathing came closer, her heart felt as ease. Yao Ying gently leans onto his shoulders, noticing that he had wanted to back away, she reaches out to hold onto his waist, softly saying: "Don't leave me, I will no longer be bothered by other women by your side anymore, just as long as you don't leave me."

Hearing her words, Lou Che doesn't say anything, but also doesn't push her away.

Gui Wan could no longer hold back, taking a little peep from behind the fake rockery, she didn't think that, what she will be seeing is the beautiful scene of Consort Ying gently resting on Lou Che. Honestly speaking, they do indeed match very well, unfortunately fate messes with people, not knowing why, she too also feels slightly upset today, although Lou Che is not someone she loves, but to personally see the intimacy between him and Consort Ying, she too can feel her heart knot up a bit.

For her who doesn't have feelings of love as the base point, to be slightly bothered by this, then if by chance the Emperor who deeply loves Consort Ying finds out.....would that not.....she dares not to think too deeply into it, Gui Wan reminds herself to forget everything she has seen today.

Having finally waited till they have walked far away, Gui Wan could finally let out a sigh of relief, her body that was leaning against the fake rockery was aching, standing up straight, perhaps the performances has started, she was planning to just slowly walk back, turning around, she hears a noise come from the thicket of bushes and trees, her heart immediately rendered shocked, could it be that there is someone else hiding within the bushes?

Taking two steps back, towards the place where the sound has come from, she looks over attentively. Within the darkness, she makes direct eye contact with another person. Gui Wan was alarmed.

Didn't think that there would be someone within the thicket, Gui Wan was somewhat perturbed. If matters that had happened today is disclosed, there will be an impending fatality awaiting them. Her heart beats in a putong putong rhythm, pinning her eyes on the figure in the darkness, she gently calls out: "Who's there?"

The person inside the thicket also appears to have been startled by her, shrinking back, and colliding into branches, thus sounding a wave of rustling. Within the still of the night as such, nothing more can appear as abrupt as this.

Seeing that the other person is even more flustered than her, Gui Wan calms down, coldly speaking: "Come out." The thicket remains quiet and motionless. After a short while, a figure slowly crawls out from the thicket, a slim body, dressed in a long ink blue robe, he was very nervous, his clothes hooks onto the branches, and his hand tries to detach it, but after several tries he was still unable to unhook his clothes.

Seeing his extremely troubled look, Gui Wan can feel herself loosen up, and even wanted to laugh. That figure who had been inside the dark the entire time, raises his head, Gui Wan looks at him attentively.

Didn't think that the one who was hiding inside the thicket was actually a delicately handsome youth, his fair skin is no less than that of a woman, his facial features holding a delicate and elegant charm, and a pair of eyes that expresses unspoken purity and innocence. Facing such a handsome and pure youth, Gui Wan was temporarily speechless.

Organising her current feelings, Gui Wan speaks, her voice flowing like quiet waves: "Who are you?" Judging by his clothes, he doesn't seem to be of noble aristocracy, his temperament doesn't seem like one all the more, within the aristocratic families, there is none who has such pure eyes like that of water.

The youth appears extremely surprised, but quickly calms down, answering: "I have come with the Kun Yuan Performance Troupe."

Only after thinking back in circles, did she manage to remember that the

performance starting in a bit, seems to be performed by the supposedly well-known Kun Yuan Performance Troupe. Gui Wan's heart somewhat rests assured, as long as is not someone from within the palace, then it will be much easier to handle.

"Since you are someone from the performance troupe, why are you not in the front hall preparing to start the performance, and instead came here?"

Once the youth heard this, he fell into a daze, not answering immediately, after staying silent for a while, he says: "I don't act in the opera, only following the performance troupe. Taking advantage of the opening of the performance, I have come here to rest for a bit, do a bit of reading." Having said that, he slightly lowers his head. Seeing that his eyes appears steady, it does not look like he is lying.

Only now did she notice that when the youth had crawled out in panic, a book had fallen beside him. Gui Wan crouches down, reaching out to pick up the book. Under the youth's slight look of shock, she turns the page, having skimmed through it, she was unable to hold back her surprise, didn't think that he was actually reading 《Ingenious Schemes That Assisted The Country》 he's actually reading such a profound strategy book?

Taking a moment of thought, Gui Wan feels a little troubled, "Just now.....did you see it all?"

The purity in the youth's eyes immediately shows a trace of panic, smacking his lips together, in the end he says nothing. Seeing this, Gui Wan was sure that he had witnessed the scene just now, this really can't be good.

Her lips lifting into a faint curve, Gui Wan asks the youth: "How old are you this year?" Her voice as gentle as the breeze in spring.

The youth was surprised, answering in a crisp voice: "Nineteen years old."

A year older than her, Gui Wan smiles. To be able to have such a pure and innocent look in one's eyes, it really isn't an easy matter, but no matter how naïve, how innocent, now that he's gotten involved in this matter, there is no way for him to get away.

Looking at this youth, Gui Wan was momentarily unable to think of a good

idea. The front hall is bustling with people, here it is overly cold and cheerless, such a sharp contrast, dividing this place into a strange dimension. A young woman dressed in a glamorous outfit and young man as pure as water, exchanging gazes, yet neither of them speaks.

She can no longer drag this on, Gui Wan thinks to herself, staring at the youth, she clearly tells him: "You have seen something that you should not have, this really is troubling. From now on, your fate is no longer yours."

Seeing the youth reveal an expression of confusion and panic, Gui Wan also couldn't help but to pity him, "Right now, you only have two paths to choose from....."

"I will not speak out about it." The youth suddenly interrupts her words, speaking with an expression of incomparable determination, the raising of his voice was also because of his firm resolution.

Lightly nodding her head, Gui Wan laughingly responds: "I believe you," Seeing the youth reveal a smile because of those three words, Gui Wan reminds him again, "But I cannot take the lives of so many people to place a bet on you, the stakes at place here are far too great.....right now you can only choose one of the two paths."

The youth's face appears even paler within the darkness, carrying an expression of contemplation, the youth quietly listens to Gui Wan's words.

"The first path, is you die." Not at all realising how brutal of a matter she is speaking of, Gui Wan's voice does not waver, as though she was speaking of something very common, "If I loudly call for people to come right now, I can immediately have you sent to your death, but.....are you willing to die like this?" Taking a pause, Gui Wan looks at the youth, wanting to see what he is thinking underneath those eyes that are as clear as glass.

Seeing the youth carry a bitter smile, Gui Wan lays down the second option, "You still have a second choice," Once again, she gives the youth an attentive look before speaking again, "Are you willing to leave the performance troupe and come with me?" Hearing this, the youth freezes.

When facing someone who knows a secret, usually there is only two approaches, one is to silence them through death, and two is to accept them as

your own. No matter how cruel and heartless this palace is, she does not want to follow the crowd^[3], belittling human lives. Besides this youth gives her the impression of a diamond in the rough.

Seeing the youth's silence, she waits, without showing the slightest bit of impatience, she silently waits for him to give her an answer.

In the dark, the youth's eyes becomes more and more firm. He raises his head, looking directly into Gui Wan's eyes, "I'm willing to go with you."

In an instance, Gui Wan gets another kind of feeling like being in a scattered dream, that youth determinedly said to her:

I'm willing to go with you.



This is a play.

Sitting on the bench, Gui Wan watches the pounding of gongs and drums on stage, and the dancing of shadow-like figures. Feeling a little dizzy, she turns her head, her eyes circling around the hall, some officials listens on obsessively, entranced as though in a drunken state; some were absentminded, exchanging flirtatious glances with their female counterparts. Lou Che did not return, Consort Ying also didn't show up with the excuse of feeling unwell, even the Emperor didn't come, only leaving the group of officials and their female counterparts to watch the performances. Seeing the situation at hand right now, she could not help but find it funny.

Unable to hold it in, Gui Wan cracks a smile, the real opera act has left, those that have remained to watch the performance, this gathering of public officials attentively watching on this play, has not even noticed, the main characters had already withdrawn. As for herself, although having already discovered the withdrawal of the main characters, has no choice but to continue watching this lead-less play.

Truly a laughable imperial palace.

Unable to help it, her thoughts return to the refreshing youth from before, she had personally followed him to face the head of the performance troupe, once the head of the troupe sees that she is the Prime Minister Madam, he immediately accepts all her requests without a second thought. So that youth is also born from a rundown scholarly family, living an impoverished life. He had followed the performance troupe to the Capital, wanting to participate in tomorrow's early spring imperial examinations.

Does this naïve youth also want to step into the officialdom? This truly is cruel.

However, when the youth heard others address her as Prime Minister Madam just before, he seemed to be very shocked. Never would he have thought that, she is someone who personally witnessed her own husband and the imperial concubine's secret rendezvous, and even dealt with a troublesome person for them. Thinking of the youth's stunned look from before, Gui Wan was no longer able to hold back her laughter.

.....

At this time, when the performance was already playing out, a figure walks towards the seats on the right, sitting down. The people in same area raise their heads in surprise, speaking in surprise: "General? You only just arrived, the performance has already reached the midpoint." The tall and slim man never holds back his tongue.

Lin Rui En nods his head, "It doesn't matter." Calmly sitting down, his expression appears rather absentminded.

The military advisor leans in, a little worried, he asks with concern: "General, where did you go just now, none of the people I sent out could find you."

Lin Rui En freezes for a moment, hesitantly answering: "I went for a stroll around the back garden of Jing Yi Hall just now."

"Oh?" The military advisor reveals an expression of surprise, lowering his voice, "Lady Consort Ying does not allow just anyone to stroll around that garden, does General know this?"

Bitterly letting out a laugh, Lin Rui En's forehead faintly carries a trace of thoughtfulness, turning his head, he could not help but to look towards the first seat on the left side, although the distance was quite far, that face could still be reflected within his eyes, he opens his mouth to answer: "I did not know there was such rules."

"As long as you say nothing then it'll be fine." The military advisor smiles in consolation. With the status of a general, so what if he had strayed into the garden, it's just that, this is the Emperor's doted consort, there is no need to be troubled by such trifle matters.

"Is that so? As long as nothing is said then it'll be fine?" Unconsciously, Lin Rui En recites this in repetition.

Noticing his odd behaviour, the military advisor turns to the left. Following Lin Rui En's line of sight, he cannot help but sigh, his heart also starting to feel troubled.

On stage, the act continues to sing as it is set in full swing.

The opera act finally comes to an end. Gui Wan feels as though a heavy load had been lifted. Although she didn't listen to much, she still feels that the performance was splendid, sometimes sad sometimes happy. It's just a shame, she wasn't in the mood to listen to it. Life is originally a drama in itself, so what's the need to go watch such dramatic plays.

Getting up, she heads out of the hall, where a horse carriage awaits. She's tired, today she needs to go home and take a good rest. Not noticing this when she had come, the aisle in this big hall is actually this long, or should she be saying, her mood has changed.

"Madam Lou....." A voice calls Gui Wan to a stop, turning her head, Prince

Duan smiles as he stands three steps outside.

Moving her body slightly, Gui Wan plasters on a shallow smile as she answers: "Prince Duan, is there anything you need?" Such callous eyes, makes people feel dreadful, but can actually be dealt with a forced smile.

Prince Duan takes two steps and then one step, crossing over to Gui Wan as he stands next to her side by side as they walk out of the hall, "It's just that I see Minister Lou isn't here, so I shall act as the trailbreaker for Madam."

Gui Wan picks up her pace, blandly answering: "Prince Duan really is caring."

Prince Duan lets out a laugh, even his laugh is more arrogant than others, "Minister Lou really is obsessed with the state affairs, will he also be staying in the palace tonight?"

"It is only natural that Husband puts his efforts in contributing to the country." The words spoken were so hypocritical, Gui Wan found that she is becoming more and more adapted to this place.

"Is it really this simple?" He takes a pause, noticing that Gui Wan is not showing any emotional expression, he changes the subject, "With such a tender wife at home, had it been me, I'd definitely wouldn't stay in the palace." His words carries a frivolous tone, deliberately to test her, he really wants to see, just how big of a tolerance this woman has.

Hearing those words, Gui Wan merely knits her brows together ever so slightly, but immediately smiles indifferently again, "Then Princess Consort Duan must be happy." Raising her eyes to see the horse carriage just in front, she subtly sighs in relief, slightly turning her head, "Your highness, sorry to trouble you, I've already arrived. Really thankful to your highness for today." Saying that, she doesn't even wait for Prince Duan's response, and had already left without looking back.

Prince Duan freezes on the spot, not showing any response. An official in crimson red leans in as he comes up to his side, standing next to Prince Duan as he speaks in a toady manner: "Does Lord Prince like this woman?"

Seeing that Prince Duan shows not the slightest of reaction, he assumes he guessed right and gives a sneaky look: "This Madam Lou cannot be touched, but

I can get a woman who looks about six or seven points like her, for your highness to enjoy."

All of a sudden, Prince Duan coldly sounds a laugh: "Who says I like this woman?" He speaks as though he's clenching his teeth in bitter hatred, turning his body to coldly eye the person in front of him, he hatefully says: "Even if I want it, I would not want a fake. Minister Zhou, if you have the time to come trying to figure out my mind, it's better to spend more time thinking about how you can keep that wusha hat on your head in the long term." (Note: Wusha is the black gauze cap that is worn by officials)

Having said that, he leaves with vigorous strides. The remaining official in crimson red shows a face filled with fear, his forehead sweating profusely.

Gui Wan walks up to the horse carriage, and only then did she find that youth was waiting at the side. Seeing his still jade-like figure stand there, her heart warms up. She doesn't know why, but having just dealt with the hypocritical imperial palace, and then see this youth that is as clear as water after that, makes her feel a type of long absent friendliness.

Firmly sitting in the horse carriage, she turns her hand to beckon the youth on board. Originally, doing this is inappropriate, but now that the skies are so dark, with no other horse carriage, she cannot just leave this youth to run after the horse carriage as they return to the Prime Minister Estate.

Both people firmly sits facing each other. The horse carriage had already started moving, Gui Wan lets out a sigh of relief, extending her hand to lift up the curtains, wanting to see the outside. Another hand suddenly appears in front of her, gently closing the curtain, the youth's voice sounds in a very gentle manner: "The winds are really strong outside, you'll catch a cold."

Looking at him in astonishment, Gui Wan freezes up, such a familiar scene, when coming here, Lou Che also seems to have said this.

The youth sees Gui Wan's reaction, his face turning red, immediately retrieving his hand back to his side. That's right, she is of such noble status, how could she tolerate him making such gestures^[4], thinking this, the youth shows an expression of bewilderment.

Noticing the youth's sudden haste, Gui Wan lets out an elegant yet tense laugh, "Thank you." Seeing the youth's clear pupils, she is struck by a thought, asking, "What's your name?"

The youth replies: "I'm called Guan Xiu Wen."

Gui Wan takes a look at him, and closes her eyes, gently leaning against the pre-prepared cushion in the carriage, listening to the sound of the carriage's wheels, she thinks for a long time, then indifferently says: "Are you prepared? Officialdom, is a path even more dangerous than being in the battlefield, if you do not have a firm conviction, how will walk down this path? The you right now is not enough."

This voice is ever so light, so faint, but with one hit one shot it is beaten into Guan Xiu Wen's heart. Intently looking at the woman with her eyes closed in front of him, this woman who had once very calmly said she will kill him, this woman who had completely changed his destiny, suddenly feeling at a loss, conviction.....just what kind of conviction should he be holding to walk down the path ahead?

The horse carriage continues to run, throwing behind the imperial palace with red walls and gold tiles. At this moment, no one knew, this very night, changed the fate of several people......

Everything, has only just begun.

- [1] Nine grades of relations or jiǔ zú / 九族 is a concept often used when it comes to the application of the law and the punishment of severe crimes. The term is most used in the phrase zhū lián jiǔ zú / 株连九族 one of the cruellest of punishments as it means the extermination of the nine grades of relations, whereby innocent family members are executed because of a crime committed by a certain family member guilt by association. The nine grades of relations includes: the criminal's parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, siblings, siblings-in-law, uncles, uncles' spouses, the criminal and the criminal's spouse. Note that only children over a certain age can be executed.
- [2] **Pear blossom bathed in rain** or **lí huā dài yǔ /** 梨花带雨 refers to a weeping beauty.

- [3] The actual proverb used for **following the crowd** is **suí bō zhú liú /** 随波逐流 which translates to **sailing to the stream** or to be **carried along by the tide**.
- [4] To make gestures of remark to someone zhǐ shǒu huà jiǎo / 指手画脚 which means to gesticulate profusely or criticize indiscriminately.

Full

After such a long chapter, the idea of leaving a comment at the end of the last chapter totally flew out my head haha, but I see that quite a few of you seem to hold really negative feelings for Lou Che from his rendezvous with the consort, I did say he's that one character that will have you swaying between liking him and disliking him, so be prepared! On the other hand, I'm actually quite glad we got to see just how clingy Yao Ying is, makes it easier to sympathise more with Gui Wan, I mean even Lou Che seems to be getting tired of her miserable crap. And honestly I know Lou Che has "devoted" himself to her with his commitment to Gui Wan right after their wedding night, but personally I really don't see the love here. I feel that his devotion is more out of his own principles and loyalty towards Yao Ying, someone precious to him in a way that, well I'm assuming he grew up with or at least known for a long time, and his love for her looks much more like that of a brotherly love, that sort of romantic love we were all expecting seems more like a one sided thing on Yao Ying's part. What's interestingly ironic is, Lou Che's commitment to be this brother figure to Gui Wan, sigh he can just continue playing brother figure part with Yao Ying since the one he's truly falling for is Gui Wan.....well who can blame the guy? Gui Wan's casual attitude of indifference itself is earning her brownie points when facing Yao Ying's clinginess and sobbing. If in contrast, Gui Wan actually kicked up a huge fuss when her newlywed husband practically tells her, he cannot not love her as there's someone else he loves, and then completely takes advantage of his commitment to give her whatever she wants, then that's whole a different story, but no, Gui Wan respected his feelings and gracefully went along with it, she made no complaints nor any asked for anything from him and just peacefully played her part as his wife in name, Madam Lou.

...ok so we already know that Consort Ying has the backing of the oh so great Prime Minister Lou in the palace, but in this chapter, we gain a little insight to just how much of a toll Consort Ying's presence have been taking within the back palace with the introduction to another victim, aside from Gui Wan, who is being greatly affected by the duo that is Consort Ying and Prime Minister Lou.



CHAPTER SIX

The Empress' Tears

Woodlands [after the rain and snow] unveils a bright blue sky, evening comes

and the city grows increasingly cold. [1]

In a blink of an eye it is already the heaven's recording of the second year. This year a downpour of rarely seen heavy snow falls upon the Capital, displaying a rare good omen, perfectly responding to the phrase "a timely snow promises a good harvest", the unfortunate thing is, at the beginning of the new year, a sensational matter has occurred in the Capital. When the Emperor was praying for good fortune this coming year, within the Hu Guo^[2] temple, a monk suddenly says, the current Consort Ying is "the country's source of misfortune", in a moment of rage, the Emperor beheaded the monk, only after did he find out, this monk is extremely famous amongst the common folks, Master Zhi Kong who had been nicknamed "Buddha Monk", within a moment, the Capital went through a constant change of events^[3], everyone was constantly chatting about the matter with one another.

This matter seems to not have affected the Prime Minister Estate in the slightest bit, due to the fact that there has recently been the additional arrival of a madam to this estate, the place appears to be exceptionally lively. The heavy snowfall covers the ground, blanketing it in white, the Prime Minister Estate is decorated with lanterns and silk streamers, such liveliness is extraordinary. Inside the estate's courtyard, an old man dressed as a housekeeper, steadily strides forth, marching over towards the room in the west wing, to see the doors closed is rather unexpected, he steps forward, rhythmically, he calls out: "Gentleman Guan, Gentleman Guan......"

The doors open in response to the noise, a young gentleman walks out of the room, in a dark blue silk robe, with long brows and bright eyes, looking refined and handsome, carrying a friendly smile, he exudes an unconceivable sense of refreshing luxury, even the housekeeper who had read countless people before was full of endlessly unspoken praises for him, greeting him respectfully with a bow, "Gentleman Guan, plum wine is being boiled in the front courtyard today, our Lord Prime Minister and Madam has invited you to the front courtyard."

Guan Xiu Wen has been in the Prime Minister Estate for two whole months already, thinking back to two months ago, it really is just a like a dream, gently nodding towards the housekeeper, he says: "May I trouble Housekeeper then."

Casually closing the door, he follows the housekeeper towards the front courtyard.

Encountering the maidservants and nannies along the way, there was no one who did not respectfully greet him, and Guan Xiu Wen would always respond with a smile, the housekeeper was filled with sincere appreciation, the entire estate knows, Madam had brought back a gentleman in his twenties from the palace, no one knows what background he had come from, Madam says he is a diamond in the rough, not long after, even Lord Prime Minister praised his talents, accepting him as his student, and even predicted that, in the spring of this year, he will pass the exams with flying colours. Having been a housekeeper for many years, Lord Prime Minister's words have never been wrong.

This man will be the future First Ranked Scholar^[4], he raises his eyes to look at the person beside him, what's even more rare is, he is never arrogant, always friendly and respectful towards others.

The two people had just walked up to the entrance of the front courtyard, when they see Lou Che walk towards them, both of them stop in their tracks, Lou Che draws in, his face carrying a smile like that of the spring breeze.

Guan Xiu Wen had already bent down to bow respectfully, his mouth calling out: "Teacher." Seeing Lou Che's slightly hasty look, he could already guess that he must be going into the palace, inside, he could not help but let rise a feeling of repellence, using the action of bowing his head, he squints his eyes ever so slightly, camouflaging the trace of disgust revealed in his eyes.

Lou Che had just received an urgent report from the palace, the Emperor has summoned him into the palace, burning with impatience, looks like it is because of this "country's misfortune" matter. His heart is already tired of this matter, but because of his imperial monarch's orders, as the subject, how is he to defy it?

Looking at the youth in front of him, he is always reminded of his past self, Guan Xiu Wen's talent is indeed preserved for someone who's capable of being the First Ranked Scholar, but for some unknown reason, he just cannot seem to be able to warm up to this refreshing young man, despite that they are already mentor and student in name, he just feels as though there is always a wall

between the two of them, inside, he laughs at himself for thinking too much, this youth may later become an effective helper of his in future, Lou Che nods at Guan Xiu Wen, and then continues to rush out nonstop.

Only after he had long left did the housekeeper raise his head, he looks towards the young man standing beside him, and was immediately taken aback, but looking closely, it is still that smiling fresh youth.....just now his eyes must have blurred, how could he have possibly seen this youth with such an expressionless face?

Along with the housekeeper, he walks into the front courtyard, the courtyard here in the east wing, it is different to the west wing's courtyard with the lotus pond, here there is a plum garden, as he walks into the plum garden, he could only sigh at the great creations of heaven and earth.

Within this white world, the striking dots of red catches your full attention, on the snow, on the branches, in the maids' hands, little dots of plum blossoms, on top of the branches there is often an accumulation of snow, forming a background against the little dots of plum blossoms, it really is a penetrating red within the white, an unconceivable beauty, between heaven and earth, this combination of white and red creates a scene of poetic and pictorial splendour. The plum blossom also carries a fresh scent, coupled with the floating aroma of wine, two fragrances mixing together, deeply affected, he approaches the smell, soaking it into his heart.

The maidservants shuttles between the plum blossom trees, their hands carrying clippers, merry laughter sounding here and there, Guan Xiu Wen had almost thought he had wandered into fairyland.

A smile unconsciously surfaces on his face, he walks towards the middle of the plum forest, and his breathing suddenly stifles.

A snow white robe with red lapels, black hair like silk, eyebrows like distant hills, eyes like the stars, the whiteness of her skin wins over the snow, her appearance wins over that of the plum blossoms, she lightly smiles, looking exceedingly fascinating and charming.

He cannot help but to stop, attentively watching this scene, until he sees that woman smiling to him as she waves, only then, did he wake up from his trance,

pulling away his eyes, he slowly walks up, stopping in front of the table, greeting her respectfully: "Madam."

Upon looking at the youth, Gui Wan was a little surprised, this youth indeed suits wearing such refined style of outfit, just like a young nobleman, she blandly laughs in response to him: "Xiu Wen, sit down." Although this young man is not related to her biologically in any way, she just feels as though he has a very familial vibe to him.

Guan Xiu Wen sits down, a cup of plum blossom wine had already been poured for him by the maid, he reaches out to take hold of the cup of wine, giving it a smell, it really has a light fragrance, a cup that touches people's hearts. Seeing such an enchanted expression on his face, Gui Wan lets out a little laugh, and quips: "How is it, lives up to the trip here right?"

Responding with a smile, Guan Xiu Wen does not speak, he lightly takes a sip of the wine, the alcohol taste is clean but not weak, the fragrant flavour lasts a long time in the mouth, unable to hold back, he states: "Truly of the best quality."

"That is of course," Gui Wan picks up the just brewed wine, taking a small drink from it, she explains, "This is gifted by her highness the Empress, originally I had thought the wine taste was too weak, didn't think that when brewed with plum blossoms, it would actually become such a beautiful wine." Just when the words were spoken, her smile slightly fades, thinking of the Empress deep within the palace, Gui Wan would feel a little regretful for her. Three days after the banquet at the palace, the Empress had invited her into the palace, originally she had thought that the Empress would deliberately make things difficult for her, who would have thought that the Empress is actually gentle and graceful, courteous and considerate, her heart could not help but to like this Empress a little, one thing lead to another, and the two became friends.

That Empress that has tranquillity amongst her beauty, is just like a plum blossom, an adornment of little dots of red, resistant to looking, resistant to smelling, resistant to appreciations, unfortunately, within the Emperor's eyes, there is only that alluring peony......

Seeing Gui Wan reveal a look of loneliness in her eyes, Guan Xiu Wen also frowns, within that moment, the world around them went silent, only the faint

laughter in the forest can be heard, a light fragrance lingering in the nose.

Gui Wan is free by nature, noticing the atmosphere turn cold, she lets out a relaxing laugh, "Lord First Ranked Scholar, why are you not speaking? Is the plum wine too fragrant, causing your soul to leave your body?" Ever since Lou Che had said he would definitely pass the exam, every time Gui Wan wants to tease him, she would address him as Lord First Ranked Scholar.

Hearing this addressment, Guan Xiu Wen foolishly reveals an expression of embarrassment, when he sees that Gui Wan is staring at him, he reveals a playful charm, his heart suddenly throbbing as he answers: "That....."

Seeing his shyness that is revealed every time he hears this First Ranked Scholar addressment, Gui Wan once again bursts out laughing.....the air within the plum garden is filled with festivity, a scene of joy and harmony.

Right when they were laughing merrily, the housekeeper hurriedly runs in from the outside, seeing panic in his expression, Gui Wan recomposes a straight face, watching as he runs up.

The housekeeper bows, his hands holding out a yellow post as he breathlessly says: "The Empress has an urgent call."

Frowning, she accepts the post, the words have been scribbled on, seems like it was been written hastily, Gui Wan was secretly surprised, the Empress has always been cautious, her writing is upright and beautiful, just like her character, but this scribbly writing, something couldn't have happened right?

Suddenly standing up, she immediately orders: "Prepare the carriage, to the back palace." Turning back to give the youth a look of apology, she turns away and walks out.

The youth holds up the cup of wine, worriedly watching her back view, walking further and further away......



This Empress' palace, she has come by numerous time this past two months, and never has she encountered a situation of being stopped at the doors, today, the Empress' palace seems to be guarded more heavily than usual, no matter how much the Empress' personal maid tries to explain, the guards were not willing to easily allow her in.

Gui Wan was secretly angry inside, taking out the golden pendant by her side, the golden pendant sparkles under the light, on it was only the one word — "Lou". The guards sees this golden pendant, and their arrogance suddenly disappears completely, withdrawing to the side, really cannot believe that Lou Che's pendant is actually much more feasible than the Empress' orders, Gui Wan was temporarily speechless, this is original an absurd world, only those who can truly grasp hold of power can be the powerful ones.

When she was passing through the front halls, her heart grew increasingly restless, Gui Wan follows the palace maid into the hall.

The Empress was leaning on the royal settee, appearing to be deep in her thoughts, not even noticing that Gui Wan had arrived, the palace maid goes up front to report, and the Empress opens her phoenix eyes, her eyes faintly carrying tears, seeing Gui Wan, she reveals a smile of relief, "Gui Wan." What kind of emotions this calling out held, Gui Wan could not tell, but just by hearing this call out, Gui Wan's heart quivers.

"Your highness," Gui Wan slowly approaches, walking up to the front of the royal settee, her voice carries a relaxing tone as she says. "Are you not feeling well?"

Lightly shaking her head a few times, the Empress sits up straight, facing Gui Wan, she asks: "Gui Wan, what shall I do?" Her words carrying helplessness, haste, panic.

Seeing that the Empress' hand was slightly trembling, Gui Wan reaches out to take hold it, saying: "Do not rush, what exactly happened?"

Bursts of energy emits from her palm, and the Empress finally reveals a smile, "Gui Wan, do you know of the Hu Guo Temple matter?" Within her voice, there was a slight leaking of the Empress' unease.

"Is it the matter regarding the his majesty killing Zhi Kong?"

"His majesty wants to thoroughly investigate the matter, my father and I have been included in this." As the Empress speaks, her facial expression becomes more and more miserable, "The Emperor has changed, he's changed.....he doesn't even listen to my explanation, it's not me, it wasn't me who did it....." The Empress who was always so graceful, breaks down in tears, her bearings completely lost.

Gui Wan was startled, this is politics, with not the slightest trace of friendship and loyalty, she calmly gives the Empress' hand a squeeze, gently asking: "This matter wasn't done by you and Elder Statesman^[5]?"

The Empress was suddenly startled, crying as she answers: "Even you don't believe me? It wasn't me, nor was it my father, we did not do it. How could...... how could even you not believe me?"

Hastening to indicate, Gui Wan speaks in a composed manner: "It's not that, I

only want to figure out the situation, only then can I assess it, don't panic." Hearing Gui Wan's gentle voice, the Empress' worked up emotions slowly calms down, taking note of her own loss of composure, she sheepishly smiles at Gui Wan.

Finally seeing the Empress regain her usual grace and calm, Gui Wan lets out a sigh of relieve, the Empress stands up, taking a few steps within the room, it seems as though she has thought of something, thinking over the matter from beginning to end again. Only after the monk had been killed by the Emperor, did they know it was Master Zhi Kong, the Emperor was furious, sending people out to investigate, in the end, everything was done to go against the Empress. This morning the Emperor for some unknown reason, had sent for people to surround the Empress' palace, and only then did the Empress realise that the situation was of utmost severity.

The Empress stands in front of the window, looking out at the boundless white snow, she speaks sorrowfully: "When he was the Crown Prince, he vowed to always believe me, the us back then, just how happy we were ah." Her face displays a trace of smile in recollection, the Empress mutters, "He's changed, we promised that together we will protect this beautiful country....."

Gui Wan did not know what to say to comfort her, throughout this entire country right now, who doesn't know that the one that the Emperor loves is Consort Ying? She opens her mouth to say something, only to find herself stumped.

The Empress turns around, her face still glistening with the clear streams of tears, she looks straight at Gui Wan, "Gui Wan, do you know how it feels to want to protect something?"

Not waiting for Gui Wan's answer, the Empress continues to speak: "I want to protect him, even if the one he wants to protect is Consort Ying, I still want to protect him, you must find it laughable, I actually want to protect the monarch of the country, I want to protect this land, this is his and my world, I need to protect it." The resolution in her eyes gradually grows firm, revealing a determination under the light.



Faintly feeling something is wrong, Gui Wan stands up, walking up to the Empress' side with quick steps, she lightly asks: "Your highness, what are you planning to do?"

"I need to kill Consort Ying," The Empress raises a laugh, carrying rupture and sadness, "I'm not doing this because of jealousy. I will accompany Consort Ying in this deception, I just want the Emperor to wake up, and take good care of the country."

Hearing this, Gui Wan was too shocked to say a word, suddenly thinking of something, she lightly cries out: "No, you are no match for them."

The Empress turns to her side and eyes Gui Wan, gaining a thorough look, this one look sees through Gui Wan's panic, the Empress coldly smiles, "You're speaking about Minister Lou?"

Gui Wan was completely stunned, not knowing how she should answer, the Empress further asks: "You think I didn't know? From the very first day I saw Consort Ying, I understood, she doesn't love the Emperor. I am a woman, I have this intuition, I can no longer continue to tolerate this, I need to protect the Emperor."

Gui Wan knits her brows together, she wants to persuade her, but does not know how to go about persuading her, the Empress holds great resolution, with no room for any negotiation.

Is this how it is when a woman goes crazy? Even the mother of the country is of no exception.

Noticing the disagreement in Gui Wan's eyes, the Empress stares at her, carrying a pleading look, she kneels down before Gui Wan. Gui Wan who just had the living daylights scared out of her, was just about to help her up, when the Empress says: "Gui Wan, yours and my husband have fallen for the same woman, understand my feelings, please? I beg of you to help me with one thing, my son is only two years old, I beg you, if anything happens to me, please become his backing force, my father, is advancing in years, please protect him, I beg you......I beg you......." The Empress has actually heavily knocked her head on the floor three times.

Gui Wan froze on the spot, her face struck with heat, she reaches up to touch her face, it was tears, tears had unknowingly rolled down her face, she helps the Empress up, gently asking her: "Is it worth it?"

The Empress smiles, she does not answer, such smile so desolate, carrying such beautiful despair, making it unbearable for one to refuse her request.

Gui Wan walks out from the Empress' place, a multitude of feelings surging up, feeling as though her reasoning is no longer coming from her head, that smile of the Empress lingers in her heart. Having walked out if the Empress' palace, she was surprised to see the Emperor waiting outside, the Emperor's brows were furrowed, pacing back and forth indecisively.

Stopping in her tracks, she takes a few steps back, Gui Wan leans against the entrance of the hall, carefully observing the Emperor's movements, the Emperor appears to be in a difficult position, dark clouds overcasting his face of handsome elegance.

The Emperor was acting heavily indecisive outside the hall, watching as he constantly paces back and forth, Gui Wan was also feeling a little tense, wishing that he would at least walk into the big hall, and comfort the Empress for once, then the Empress would not be in such despair.

Within this peaceful courtyard of the palace, the time passes by little by little, in the end the Emperor did not set foot into the Empress' palace. Gui Wan grew anxious whilst waiting, thinking that the Empress would also be waiting within that large, lonely hall, flames of agitation grew in her heart.

The Emperor finally sets foot on the steps, making his way up, Gui Wan's heart was put at ease, perhaps a tragic fate has been saved, just when she was secretly rejoicing, an eunuch hurriedly runs in, calling out: "Your majesty, your majesty....." The Emperor looks back, his footsteps coming to a halt, the eunuch comes close, whispering into the ear of the Emperor, the Emperor's face immediately shows a look of shock, with a turn of his body, he walks down the steps, leaving without even looking back.

Seeing him walk away so quickly, Gui Wan was extremely disappointed, walking out of the hall, she slowly walks down the steps, extending her hand to beckon the nearby guard, coldly asking: "Where is the Emperor off to in such a hurry?"

The guard froze, unable to understand, why the Prime Minister Madam would ask this, but he respectfully answers nonetheless: "It is said that something came up at Lady Consort Ying's side, that's why......" Gui Wan cuts off his words with a wave of her hand, her face revealing a look of resentment.

Looking back, the Empress' chambers so desolate and cold, other than the ever so silent guards, there are no other people here, the usual scene of visitors swarming the place seems fake, lightly letting out a sigh, Gui Wan walks down the large hall.

This imperial palace has given her too much lamentations, the deep wistfulness of the women that are confined in this place, through the layers and layers of golden tiles and red walls, they fill up the imperial palace, she attentively listens, the wind scraping past her ears also sounds like that of a resentful sigh as well as the struggles that sinks in before despair.

Sitting in the horse carriage, she speeds out of the palace, with a slight lift of the curtains, a blast of wind blows into the carriage, and suddenly there is rustling of chilliness within, feeling the cold, Gui Wan is blew over with a philosophical feeling, pondering for a bit, she orders the coachman: "Don't cause a commotion, make a turn, to the market."

The horse carriage turns back, turning towards the market.

At this time when the lanterns had just been lit up, there were not many people out on the streets, the carriage slows as it pulls into the market street,

lifting a corner of the curtains, she takes a look at the situation outside, ordinary people, mundane faces, unpretentious smiles, her thoughts takes off spinning along with the carriage's wheels, could this be what the Empress wants to protect? Evoking a touch of a knowing smile, she has now slightly come to understand the Empress' obsession.

The Empress' words once again echoes in her head: I want to protect this picturesque^[6] land......

The horse carriage suddenly stops, completely unprepared, Gui Wan's body bolts forward, her hand pressed against the wall of the carriage, a grave voice asking: "What happened?"

The coachman's voice travels through the curtains: "Madam, there's people fighting ahead, so the road has been blocked, we can't get past." With sincere anxiety and sincere fear, his voice is filled with frustration.

To cause trouble in the Capital's downtown area, who could be so bold? Extending a hand to raise the curtain, she looks outside, the pedestrians on the road have all stopped to watch, huddling around into a circle right in the middle of the road, completely blocking the pathway, seeing such situation, Gui Wan could also do nothing, only ordering the coachman: "Pull over to the side, we'll set off again once they disperse."

Half lying inside the carriage all alone, her eyes closed, Gui Wan was drowsily falling into a light sleep, under such haziness, the mentioning of Consort Ying's name once again travels into her ear, her brows knits together, having already left the imperial palace, how could she still be hearing this name? She slowly opens her eye, the ruckus outside the carriage gets louder and louder, to the point that even the heavy carriage curtains were unable to block it off, Consort Ying's name can be faintly heard from the quarrel, Gui Wan was covertly intrigued.

Once again lifting the curtains, she asks: "Who are the people arguing ahead?"

The coachman respectfully stands by the side, hearing this questions, he immediately answers: "It seems that conflict has arose between people of the Shu Zhang Estate and Yao Estate whilst on the road, thus causing a scene here."

Is there not enough dispute within the palace that even their relatives have to battle it out outside? Gui Wan coldly watches ahead, that type of heavy yet powerless feeling of disgust once again resurfaces in her heart.

"Madam," The coachman was a little worried, to see Gui Wan with such unsettled expression, he has never seen the Madam be like this before, "Would you like to ask them to move aside for us to pass through first?"

"No need," A trace of blurred smile floats to the surface of her face, Gui Wan sadly says, "I want to watch on."

The coachman says nothing and withdraws to the side, the more he thinks about it, the more unfitting it seems to be, and so he runs up to a store by the side, getting hold of an errand boy, stuffing some silver to him, he whispers a few words into his ear, the errand boy hurriedly nods his head before running off in flying style, heading towards the direction the carriage had come from.

The argument does not seem to have the slightest means of stopping, there's even the tendency to continue intensifying, with neither sides willing to give way, watching on, she was just about to make a move, when hurried hooves suddenly sounds, Gui Wan turns her head to look behind, a small squad of imperial guards speedily closes in on their horses, the leader of them is actually — Lou Che.

A complexion as clear as jade^[7], gentle warmth like that of the spring breeze, containing an unexposed prestige, with an indescribable appearance of magnificence that sweeps people of their feet, the arguing retainers of the two Estates, unanimously opens up a path.

Gui Wan watches, her husband indeed has some clever tricks, half merciful, half intimidating, simultaneously scaring off the two households' retainers. With no drama to watch, the crowd quickly disperses, the people flowing out like endless streams, and instantaneously half the crowd has already disappeared.

Riding up close to the carriage, Lou Che's eyes carries a hint of anxiety, gently asking: "What's wrong? Why are you not returning home?"

Gui Wan raises her head, revealing a smile, "I wanted to get some fresh air, what made Lord Husband come over?"

Seeing the unsettlement carried under her smile, a look of absentmindedness,

Lou Che's deeply laments inside, he dismounts from the horse, walking up to the carriage, he sees strands of her pitch black hair lift up in the wind, interlacing with the ribbon, Lou Che reaches out to smooth over her loose hair, and conveniently pulls down the curtains, he turns his head back and orders: "Back to the estate." Having said that, he also jumps into the horse carriage.

Cold air envelopes the inside of the carriage, Gui Wan's expression shows fatigue, she closes her eyes, not knowing why, she does not want to face Lou Che right now.

Lou Che watches over Gui Wan attentively, seeing her fatigue, his heart was pained, this girl he has greatly cared for, doted on, and treasured, without realising, he has become accustomed to particularly like seeing her carefree smile, just now, to suddenly receive the news of her being blocked on the road, he immediately rushed here, seeing her faintly carry such troubled look, he could not help but to reach out to stroke her eyebrow, only to feel Gui Wan quiver, her head gently moving aside, and his fingers is met with nothing but air, Lou Che retrieves his hand, somewhat startled.

"Gui Wan," Lou Che's gentle voice lightly calls out, "What happened?"

Still keeping her eyes close, Gui Wan's voice was clear and sweet: "Lord Husband, nothing's happened at all, I just feel a little tired today."

Suddenly feeling this addressment of "Lord Husband" was full of half-heartedness and sarcasm, Lou Che's heart froze, he has not realised what he has done, to have already caused Gui Wan to hold something against him, Gui Wan was startled, opening her eyes wide, she looks into Lou Che's eyes in shock.

Lou Che wraps his hands around Gui Wan's rather icy ones, dumbly smiling, "The weather is so cold, yet you still keep the curtains open, is it not fine to just have them make way?" His voice carrying a thin layer of reproach.

Withdrawing her own hand, Gui Wan coldly laughs, "One side is from the Empress' maiden family, the other side is from Consort Ying's relatives, how could I dare to.....or how could I be able to?"

Lou Che does not find her uncongenial, brushing back Gui Wan's hair, his voice still ever so gentle: "Why could you not be able to?" Finding that Gui Wan was wearing a palace outfit, his eyebrows wrinkles, "On such freezing cold day, are you not cold?"

Gui Wan lightly moves away, leaning towards the inner side of the carriage, she does not reply.

After a moment of silence, Lou Che suddenly says: "From the south we have just received the tribute of two rare artic snow wolf skin, it is most warm for winter, how about I get someone to make an outfit for you?"

Gui Wan smiles, "Shouldn't it be for the Empress and Consort Ying?"

Lou Che's expression remains composed, his smile unaffected, "The Empress' outfit is no longer needed."

Gui Wan looks dead onto Lou Che, just like how she had seen him before, her husband's outer appearance is as warm as jade, but inside he is actually as ice cold as frost, thinking back to the mournful scene of the Empress in the palace, her heart turns sour, asking: "The Empress' matter, was it your doing?"

Lou Che froze, didn't think that this question would be bluntly put out by Gui Wan, many secretly thinks this, but to dare to ask about it, there is none, thinking back to Gui Wan getting fairly close to the Empress as of late, he suddenly understands why she has been acting so uncharacteristically today, "Gui Wan, don't get involved in politics, this involves a lot of relations inside."

"You know the Empress is innocent," Gui Wan says, "You know that. For Consort Ying, do you want to take this opportunity to dispose of the Empress? How could you do this? For one woman, you want to ruin the back palace?" Her words causes her chest to rise and fall, looking a little bit emotionally unstable.

"Gui Wan....." Lou Che grabs hold of her arm, "Listen to me....."

Gui Wan says nothing, indifferently waiting for his explanation, Lou Che helplessly laughs, slowly saying: "This matter is not as simple as you think it is, this matter is indirectly related to the Empress. Behind all of this, there is also the distribution of family problems involved and the power forces within the imperial court. You cannot listen to the words of the Empress."

Hearing his words, Gui Wan's expression is much more at ease, lightly asking: "If the Empress was to get involved in this matter, what will happen?" Without waiting for Lou Che's reply, she speaks again, "Can you not harm the Empress?

Leave her with a way out, she is after all a mother, she is the mother of the current crown prince."

He has never seen Gui Wan's emotions rise so high, this girl has always been so indifferent, to actually reveal such amiable delivery of tenderness right now, he finds himself unable to bear to disagree with her request, Lou Che could not help but to let out a sigh, nodding his head, in promise to her.

Gui Wan's heart relaxes, as long as Lou Che promises, the problem should not be too severe, she reveals a gleaming smile, "Lord Husband, thank you."

Seeing this smile again, Lou Che also smiles, a smile like that of the spring breeze in March.

- [1] The chapter opens up with the last two lines of the poem **Viewing the Snow Peaks of Mount Zhong Nan** by **Zu Yong**....[click here for full translation]
- [2] Hù 护 means to protect, whilst guó 国 means country or nation, so the name of the temple hù guó sì / 护国寺 literally translates to Protect the Nation/Country Temple. [Additional note: Hu Guo Temple actually existed but there is only a traditional street named after it today Hu Guo Si Street plus there's a widely known snack restaurant there called Huo Guo Si Xiao Chi]
- [3] The actual proverb used for a **constant change of events** is **fēng yún biàn huàn /** 风云变幻 which translates to **amidst the changes of the winds and clouds**.
- [4] **First Ranked Scholar** or **zhuàng yuan /** 状元 means the scholar who passes the imperial exam in first place of course, the term is similar to how people would refer to valedictorians in America, *etc.* except that there is no valedictory speech so I can't really apply this as the translation. [Additional note: Nowadays the term, zhuàng yuan / 状元 is used to refer to those who excels in certain areas]
- [5] **Elder Statesman** is the rough translation for **guó zhàng /** 国文 which is an addressment for the Emperor's father in law, the Empress' father. His position as the father in law to the Emperor makes him a grand elder to the state also.
 - [6] **Picturesque**, in Chinese it is said like **rú shī rú huà /** 如诗如画 which

literally means, like that of poems and paintings.

[7] A complexion as clear as jade or miàn rú guān yù / 面如冠玉 – an expression referring to a handsome man.

Full



CHAPTER SEVEN

Inauspicious Calamity

In heaven's recording of the second year in spring, the case of "Hu Guo Temple" has finally settled, because the case had no empirical evidence, in the end they could only let the matter rest. However rumours circulating, implicated that the matter concerns the Empress, after attesting the case, the Emperor substantially reduced the officials on the Elder Statesman's side, thus causing the entire court to discuss the matter. In contrast, the power of Consort Ying's maiden family had been consolidated, under such diminishment, the glory of the Elder Statesman's Estate is no longer like the past. (Elder statesman refers to the Empress' father)

"At least the imperial guards have withdrawn from the Empress' palace, her Empress title has also been saved, other than that, she can no longer afford to dream of anything else." Under such slender jade-like fingers, the newly grown willow shoots leans towards the nose, a gentle sniff, and sure enough, it indeed carries a refreshing breath of spring air, Gui Wan reveals a faint smile of appreciation, letting go of the willow shoot, she turns her head to ask: "Did

nothing else happen?"

The housekeeper lowers his head, his speaking tone remains rigid with no fluctuations, reporting as though he is reciting from a book: "Nothing else has happened, these past two weeks, the most discussed matter outside is the case of the 'Hu Guo Temple'."

"Once matters have been spread around too much, they would get tired, and everything will be alright again." Gui Wan laughingly says, Lou Che has indeed kept his promise to her, the Empress title has been protected, the back palace has not been thrown into a chaotic mess. Along with the arrival of spring, everything is developing in a good direction. Thinking up to this point, she could even more so feel a strong sense of derangement.

"What about the Empress, did she show any response?"

"No," The housekeeper calmly speaks, "There has been no response at all, the back palace is already back to the usual."

Placing the willow branch into the flower vase, casually fiddling with it a bit, Gui Wan feels that the big rock in her heart has been lifted. Half a month passed after speaking with the Empress, the matter that has been bothering her so much, seems to have been resolved. The corner of Gui Wan's lips curves up, was just about to order the housekeeper to withdraw, when suddenly, she once again feels that something is not right, thinking deeper, the Empress is of graceful and restrained character, but once she says something, she would definitely stick to it, like the typical soft on the outside strong on the inside character. She said she would kill Consort Ying, could she really have given up now?

She wouldn't, she must be waiting......waiting for the best opportune moment, thinking up to here, the image of the Empress' poignant smile seems to have once again flash before her, without realising, the strength in her hand intensifies, and the willow sounds a snap, Gui Wan suddenly lowers her head, looking at the snapped willow, ah such fragility. Her brows knits together, and she turns around, "Send people to monitor the Elder Statesman's Estate, once there is any unusual movement, tell me." The extreme serenity right now, vaguely carries the feeling of a brewing storm, she cannot standby without

making any preparations.

Empress-ah, you must not be reckless......

The housekeeper raises his head, his face showing an unreadable expression, this was the first time she had seen his calm face show a change of emotion, looking at him, she asks: "What's wrong?"

The housekeeper once again lowers his head, all expressions wiped off his face, his answer short and affirmative: "Yes, I will send for people to monitor the Elder Statesman's Estate day and night." This is strange, Lord Prime Minister's orders this morning, and Madam's orders right now, is exactly the same, he does not know whether he should say it or not, just when he wanted to open his mouth to say it, he thinks over it again, in the end he just keeps the words in his mouth.

Noticing the housekeeper quietly leave, Gui Wan observes the branches she has just picked from the tree, extending her hand to take hold of them, she could not help but murmur: "It's already spring now, why is it still so cold?"

The Yan's grass is like jaded silk, the Qin's green mulberry branches hangs low.

"The day the husband thinks of returning home, will be when his wife is heartbroken....." Such clear voice reciting the poem intervenes, mild and melodious, carrying a faint smile like that of wind and cloud.

Placing down the brush, and turning around, indeed it is Gui Wan who stands by the door, Guan Xiu Wen raises his hand, greeting her: "Madam, what brings you to the west wing?"

Seeing his innocent smile and hearing his incomparably sincere words, Gui Wan steps into the study room, she speaks in a melodic laughing tone: "Why is the future First Ranked Scholar reciting {{Spring Thoughts}}?" Every time she sees Guan Xiu Wen carry this sense of purity that moves everyone around him, she cannot help but to tease him, didn't think that such childishness nature still exists within her.

Having long been getting the words "First Ranked Scholar" gratingly bring out the shame in him, Guan Xiu Wen freely passes by the study desk, saying to Gui Wan: "{{Spring Thoughts}} is originally a great poem, now that it coincides with the spring breeze in March, it carries nothing more but the feeling of being moved by what one sees." [1]

It vaguely feels as though his explanation is a little far-fetched. {{Spring Thoughts}} is written about a woman's yearning love as she waits for her husband's return, how can it be moving by what one sees? Discarding the mixed thoughts in her head, Gui Wan does not think much of it, sitting on the guest chair in the study room, she turns her body, asking Guan Xiu Wen: "The imperial examinations starts next month, have you prepared?"

"Everything has already been prepared," His smile carries a slight hint of shyness, Guan Xiu Wen modestly replies, "I hope I will be able to pass with great results." In front of this woman, he is able to speak out his most honest thoughts, could this have something to do with her being the one who changed his destiny?

From Lou Che she had already known that he is a talent capable of the First Ranked Scholar title, without the slightest surprise, Gui Wan's smile remains unwavered, "Didn't I ask you whether you were prepared to get into the officialdom?" Her voice sounding ever so relaxed, as though they are having the usual conversation.

Guan Xiu Wen freezes, unable to utter a word for the time being, he gazes at Gui Wan attentively, beginning to open his mouth in reply: "I am already prepared for officialdom, but, I have yet to find something I want to protect." His voice was light, carrying regret as well as an unknown feeling of loneliness.

This youth is so much like herself, Gui Wan's thoughts quickly makes a turn, with no firm conviction, the road ahead will be much more difficult to walk ah, such purity like water, would it become an ink stained pool one day? Looking at Guan Xiu Wen with concern, Gui Wan asks: "If one day, you find that your feelings clashes with that of imperial power, what would you choose, what would you abandon?" She does not know why she asks him this question, such question that even she has no answer to, because this youth has no background whatsoever, has no political benefits, under a chanced coincidence, he has also come to know the truth of certain matters, that is why she can ask him this, with no burden, without having to worry about the consequences.

Hearing this, Guan Xiu Wen remains dumbly frozen, not knowing how to answer, what he had seen three months ago, still remains fresh in his memory right now. Other than Gui Wan, no one else knows of this matter, this is the secret between the two of them, it also the key that has changed the course of his fate, countless times has he recalled that scene in his dreams, within the darkness, that woman looking at him, asking, are you willing to leave the performance troupe and follow me? He himself must have been possessed, not knowing her identity, and within the backlight, he could not even make out the person's appearance clearly, yet he readily answers in agreement.

On several occasions, thinking back to that time, he would always feel so puzzled, at that time, what was it that made him agree, was it the fear of death? That is but only a small portion of his reason, exactly for what reason.....even now he still does not understand, really does not understand......

Seeing Gui Wan wait for his answer with a sparkling smile, his thoughts stirs, he does not regret his decision back then, if he was given the choice once again, he would still make the same decision, if he is able to face such smile so often. With utmost certainty, he answers: "I also don't know how I should choose." Neither of the two answers are right, nor are they wrong, under such situation, there is no value in choice.

A little disappointed, Gui Wan says nothing, clearly knowing that the question is difficult to choose from, yet she still hopes for someone to give her an answer, this answer can at least enlighten her, leaving her to face the chain of events that will be coming her way in future, lightly shaking her head twice, she turns her head to the side, looking out the window, reciting: "The spring breeze is but a stranger, [so] why does it enter the bed curtains?"

Guan Xiu Wen's heart throbs at the reciting of the poem, it was the last two lines of {{Spring Thoughts}}. When recited from Gui Wan's lips, it actually carries feelings of distant and confused feelings, could it be that she has encountered some sort of difficulty? He could not help but ask: "Is there something troubling you Madam?"

"There is," Gui Wan clearly answers, "There's many troubling matters." Another two weeks has past, and the Empress has still not made a single move, she too is feeling rather restless.

Guan Xiu Wen slightly furrows his brows, gently asking: "What matter could be troubling you?" Could it be because of Prime Minister Lou's matters? The scene from three months ago abruptly jumps into his mind, making him secretly feel rather repelled.

Deliberately wanting to test his understanding of the imperial court, Gui Wan cautiously mentions: "Do you know of the 'Hu Guo Temple' incident?"

Guan Xiu Wen seriously thinks about it, he implicitly smiles towards Gui Wan and says: "Hu Guo Temple, is this referring to the matter of Consort Ying and the Empress' offering of joss sticks?"

"What?"

Gui Wan was dumbfounded, thinking she had heard wrong, she raises her brows, her voice quiet as she speaks: "When was this? Consort Ying and the Empress went to offer joss sticks?" Her voice was filled with uncertainty, why is this? Why is it that she knows nothing of this matter, could there have been some misunderstanding in between, or could it be......

Guan Xiu Wen sees that her reaction was somewhat strange, and slowly explains: "Three days ago, Consort Ying and the Empress went to offer joss sticks, a votive offering, quelling the aftermath of the 'Hu Guo Temple' incident. This matter, is known throughout the entire Capital, everyone is curious, why these two arch-rivals would go offer joss sticks together."

Gui Wan has thoroughly frozen, a chill runs up her spine, she already understands where the problem lies. The Empress must be wanting to take action now, which is why she left the Capital with Consort Ying in order to make their offerings, because only then, can she make her move. All of this, Lou Che should already know of, that's why the housekeeper has been keeping the facts from her, the daily reports were all to deceive her. What's more serious is, since Lou Che is aware of the Empress' plans, then wouldn't the Empress lose without a doubt? The more she thinks about it, the more serious the matter is. Between both sides, one side would definitely fail, and it would most likely be the Empress. Since the ancient times, the loser of imperial power struggle, usually only ever have one path to walk......thinking up to this point, Gui Wan's blood runs cold.

Her body suddenly stands up, her voice cold, losing its usual leisurely vibe that captivates others, "How long have they left? Did they leave three days ago?"

Guan Xiu Wen was startled by her sudden movement, hastily replying: "Yes, they left three days ago, and are expected to be back tomorrow morning." He did not understand why Gui Wan's complexion suddenly turned pale, but was still able to sense the seriousness of the situation.

This cannot do......Gui Wan immediately turns and runs for the door, this matter cannot happen.

Grabbing onto Gui Wan's hand, Guan Xiu Wen was also surprised as he looks at his own hand, just now, he did not even think before grabbing her, didn't think through how abrupt this action of his is, just that he definitely cannot just watch her run out in panic like that, anxiously asking her: "What's wrong?"

Feeling the slight pain of being abruptly caught by the arm like that, causes her to suddenly wake up a bit, and hearing the youth question her, she reminds herself not to panic, she needs to remain calm, the situation still has the chance to be turned around. Bringing back a touch of a smile, she orders the youth: "Xiu Wen, you quickly go help me call for a horse carriage, not from the Prime Minister Estate, also cannot let the housekeeper and the others know of this, I need to go out right now."

Perhaps it was that calling of Xiu Wen, her calling of him bringing a slight shock to his heart, or perhaps it was the trace of helplessness that was revealed in her eyes, causing him to no longer ask any further, seeing that Gui Wan has faintly restored her calm, he immediately runs out the door.

An hour later, a horse carriage fleetingly passes by the big street outside the Prime Minister Estate, raising gusts of yellow dust, the turning of wheels sounding crazily as it runs.

Gui Wan who was sitting in the carriage was feeling extremely uncomfortable, but she must endure this. One hand grabbing hold of the shaft the cart, half lowering her body, she agonises over what kind of method the Empress would use, vaguely guessing, a long time ago, she has once heard that the Elder Statesman has group of powerful phantom soldiers, the approach must be a midway rob and kill. If that's the case, they can push away the responsibility,

thus protecting the Elder Statesman's life, but what about the Empress? What plans does she have for herself then? She had already withheld the determination of death......could it be......

Hear heart jumps up and down along with the bumpy carriage, Gui Wan was feeling unceasingly anxious, Lou Che promised her that he would spare the Empress, such promise has already been fulfilled, this time, he would no longer be lenient right?

Such a cold heart. What could she do now? Will she be able to stop the Empress in time like this? Could it be that there is no one that can help her?

Just when she was thinking this, the horse carriage comes to an abrupt stop, secretly feeling annoyed inside, she gravely asks the coachman: "What exactly happened? Why did you stop?" She can no longer afford to be delayed.

The coachman's fearful voice travels in: "We've reached the North Gate, there's a border inspection."

They already reached the city gates? Raising the curtains, she looks out, the soldiers at the city gates were thoroughly inspecting, her eyes travels across, a good few people were stood by the city gates, it appears to be the commanders, enthusiastically discussing something, amongst them is.....is General Lin Rui En.

That young general who is cold on the outside but warm on the inside, the imperial court's number one commander, is the only person who can compete with Lou Che in the imperial court. Seeing him, Gui Wan's heart jumps, joy flowing in, there's hope.

[1] Being moved by what one sees – chù jǐng shēng qíng / 触景生情 literally translates to a touching view that gives rise to feelings/emotions.

[Additional note] Click here for the fully translated version of <u>Spring Thoughts</u>, <u>by Lǐ Bái / 李白</u>, the poem that has been mentioned in this chapter, you may have noticed that the writer has cleverly broken up and included all lines of the poem throughout the chapter, which I have italicised.

And General Lin comes to save the day! Haha. I hope you guys weren't getting too used to the long chapters this may be a really short chapter, but there's

another two part chapter coming up next, although I'd probably only be able to get one part translated for next week, but chapter eight is a really action packed chapter and the first part is definitely a nice treat for all you on the General Lin ship ^_~

Part 1



CHAPTER EIGHT

Between Life And Death (Part One)

"Wa~ such a pretty woman, is the first I have seen....." A soldier standing at the entrance of the North Gates marvels in a low voice, he had just wanted to take a closer look, but with a glance, he sees General Lin's frosty cold eyes, and for a while, he did not dare to speak again.

The soldiers by the side were all sneakily laughing, to be absent-minded during General Lin's arranged working time, and even speaking in a hushed whisper, he must be too daring, this little brat must have never seen a beauty before, here at this remote area of the North Gates, what beauty could possibly appear? Several soldiers look in the direction that the accused soldier was looking at, instantaneously emitting a breath-taking gasp together.

Lin Rui En was rather displeased, soldiers who had just left the battlefield are particularly easily distracted, and the soldiers within the Capital are even more so excessively sloppy, his facial expression stiffens, and was just about to scold

them, when he sees that the soldier who was whispering just before, desperately pointing in the direction behind him, Lin Rui En did not understand, turning around, a figure of graceful demeanour enters his vision, and his heart was slightly throbbing at the sight.

She carried a sort of soothing smile, walking over somewhat anxiously, thinking he had seen wrong, Lin Rui En looks away, and then looks over again, it is indeed her, what is she doing here? In his moment of confusion, he notices that her smile did not reach her eyes, her eyes, filled with loss......

Gui Wan walks up to Lin Rui En, gracefully bowing in greeting, she faintly reveals a bitter smile, saying: "General, would you be able to help me?" Her tone filled with sincerity and because of anxiety, she appears to be incomparably fragile.

Lin Rui En froze on the spot, the meaning of her words have not yet fully sunken in, he says in astonishment "......Madam Lou......" Hearing her carry such helplessness in her tone, he begins to feel that matters are not so simple, thinking for a moment, he once again sees Gui Wan's face reveal a trace of hopelessness and difficulty, Lin Rui En sends away all of the surrounding soldiers, leaving only two people in the corner of the city gates.

Below the city watchtowers, it is cold and windy, Gui Wan feels as though even her ears were stinging in the cold, suddenly noticing Lin Rui En turn his body, stationing himself in a way that blocked most of the wind when another gust blew over, she was a little startled, could it be that he did this on purpose? A little bit of warmth crept up on her, seeing that there were no longer any loitering people around them, Gui Wan picks out the important points to explain the situation.

Having finished listening to Gui Wan's narrative, Lin Rui En felt rather surprised, at the same time, he noticed that Gui Wan deliberately left out many things in her story, nor did she go into details, aware that things have reached a critical state, Lin Rui En summons a soldier, ordering: "Bring over my horse."

Hearing him say this, Gui Wan settles down a bit, as long as Lin Rui En rushes over, the situation should differ, but deep inside, she was still very nervous, she just has the feeling that something big is going to happen.

Lin Rui En quietly orders the soldier to do something, then turns back to Gui Wan, saying: "In the distance between here and Hu Guo Temple, there is the Feng Qi Slope, a natural barrier of the land, if they are to take action, it is very possible that they'd choose to do so there. I have already passed on an order, sending over the imperial guards. I'll immediately rush over now, you can rest assured." His voice smooth yet powerful, with the ability to calm people's hearts.

Gui Wan lightly nods her head, because his assurance has made her feel more at ease, nodding, she lightly says: "Feng Qi Slope?" Her heart makes a sudden jump with an ominous feeling, seeing that the soldier has pulled the horse over, and Lin Rui En mounting the horse, she quickly walks forward, Gui Wan reaches out and pulls on the horse saddle, looking into Lin Rui En's shocked eyes, she says: "General, can you take me along?"

This woman is always able to leave him stunned, seeing the haunting of concerns on her flower-like face, her knitted brows showing her unwavering determination, Lin Rui En remains silent for a moment before an inaudible sigh lightly escapes his lips, he lowers half of his body, and looks directly into Gui Wan's eyes, gently saying: "Madam Lou, please excuse me."

Hearing this, Gui Wan raises her head ever so slightly, looking directly into his beautiful eyes, she finds that under his indifferent demeanour, there lies implications of unreadable tides of feelings, she has yet to fully digest the meaning of his words, when her body suddenly feels light, her waist tightens, and her entire body has already been lifted onto the horse by Lin Rui En, in a moment of startlement, Gui Wan was unable to show any reaction.

One hand settling Gui Wan down in front, one hand pulling at the reins, with a firm exertion of force, the horse immediately runs forth like a shooting arrow.

Without the chance to utter a single word, the horse had already flew forward, Lin Rui En's horse is originally the best warhorse, compared to typical horses, it is much taller, much faster, a short moment on this galloping horse, and Gui Wan's head was feeling dizzy, compared to the bumpy ride of the horse carriage before, the warhorse is steadier, but the speed is much faster, having never ridden on a warhorse before, Gui Wan's mind went blank, she closes her eyes, all that can be heard is the whistling of the wind by her ear, it is only the beginning of spring, and so the cold wind seeps into the collars of Gui Wan's clothes, the chill causing

her to shiver.

Noticing Gui Wan's discomfort, Lin Rui En hesitates for a moment, and in the end slows down the horse's speed, he suddenly hears Gui Wan say something, but the sound of the wind was too loud, blocking out her voice, Lin Rui En leans in to listen, an obviously weak voice says: "Don't slow down....."

How could such weak body hold such strong will? Lin Rui En was puzzled, a binding hold on the reins, he holds her more tightly to his chest, clearly knowing that this is inappropriate, he continues to keep the slower speed for a moment, taking off his own cloak, he covers Gui Wan's body with it, wrapping up her entire body, at the same time, he also covers up his restless heart.

The warhorse desperately speeds forward like a shooting star, Gui Wan's heart finds temporary peace within the whistling wind, slowly starting to relax from her earlier alertness, only the anxiety deep inside her heart has not diminished, her hand unconsciously clutches onto Lin Rui En's clothes, burying her face into the cloak, as her consciousness gradually blurs......



A loud sound enters her ears, awakening her from haziness, mind immediately clearing up and eyes suddenly opens, looking at the scene before her in disbelief. This is the mountain slope that lies against the mountain valley, the slope is a little steep, at this moment, half of the mountain slope is sinking in a sea of flames. Far ahead, there is actually hot air rushing forward, on the slope, soldiers and bandits were fighting amongst the mass, watching from high up, it appears that the bandits still have the upper hand. Deep inside, she came to understand, those bandits must be the phantom soldiers from the Elder Statesman's Estate in disguise, if not, they would not be so highly skilled in martial arts and also so organised.

Empress-ah, have I still come a step too late? Gui Wan was overcome with

grief, feelings of disappointment welling up.

Lin Rui En also watches this scene, completely startled, two hours of urgent rush, and they were still too late, never would he have thought, the situation would turn out like this, to think that the gentle Empress had actually caused such an extremely fierce matter to arise, no one could ever have imagined this, could it be that women's appearance are all this deceitful?^[1] Just like the woman in his arms, clearly has a posture of a fragile willow, but is actually exceptionally strong willed.

His hold tightens, his legs clamped, saying to the already awaken Gui Wan: "Be careful." A shout is heard, a horse's hooves hoists up, one horse takes the lead and rushes forward, within a blink of an eye it had already charged into the ring of fire. In no hurry to engage in battle with the phantom soldiers, Lin Rui En looks all around in search for traces of the Empress and Consort Ying within this chaotic battle.

Sound of swords, sound of voices, sound of cries, all were like incantations drilling into Gui Wan's ears, so loud it caused an endless headache, she had clearly made all mental preparations, but in face of such brutality, there is still a sense of non-acceptance. Gui Wan composes herself, paying full attention to her surroundings, within the sea of fire, she sees no signs of Consort Ying and the Empress' figures. The hot air whisks up to her face, her chest feeling stuffy, Gui Wan was in an utmost uncomfortable position.

The phantom soldiers' fighting method is extremely terrifying, fighting desperately regardless of their own safety, displaying an imposing manner of a life for a life. The imperial soldiers, on the other hand, were in a chaotic mess, unable to show any methodical approach, nobody cared for one another, fresh blood continuing to spill, a scene of death and injuries.

No longer able to get a clear view of the surrounding situation, Lin Rui En pulls at the horse's reins, ready to turn back, it really is impossible to distinguish the situation at hand, nor were there any signs of the Empress and Consort Ying, he cannot continue to risk venturing around, it does not matter if it is just him, but the person in his arms is too fragile.

Just when the horse turns around, galloping away, a phantom soldier takes

notice of Gui Wan's face that was revealed from within the cloak, stunned for a moment, he loudly cries out: "Consort Ying, it's Consort Ying, over there." The voice was rigid with no fluctuations in tone, but it spreads far and wide, in merely a moment, a group of surrounding phantom soldiers had already gathered.

Gui Wan has never panicked so much before, her heart jumping up to her throat, hearing the person's loud cry, she remains frozen for a long while, how could they have mistaken her for Consort Ying? Her thoughts makes a turn, these phantom soldiers have never seen Consort Ying before, now they have wrongly recognised her as Consort Ying, but at a time like this, she cannot just open her mouth to refute their claims, no one would even listen, her heart tightly shrinks, the pain of her body and the pain of her heart strikes together, unconsciously her hand clutches, turns out she clutched onto clothes carrying warmth, she raises her head to take a look, a look of indifference, distinctive lines of his side profile meets her eyes, slightly easing her heart, she tightly clutches onto his clothes, hoping that in doing so, it will give her courage and strength.

Sensing Gui Wan's tension and panic, Lin Rui En lightly frowns, he did not bring his broadsword on his way here, now it is too late to regret it, his right hand reaches for his waist, a silver light flashes by, and his hand has already met with the handle of a soft-edged sword, with the rotating of his wrist, a silver light can be seen, the crowd had yet to react, when four phantom soldiers had immediately fallen in front of the horse. Gui Wan looks over attentively, the wounds caused by the soft sword were extremely fine, even the blood could not flow out smoothly, only revealing a single line of red. Deep inside, she was rendered in absolute shock.

It is very difficult to describe the situation that had just happened, a look of indifference remains settled on the handsome young general's face, silver lights flashing from his hands, the light hitting wherever he directed it, opening up a path, some people could not even catch a glimpse of the weapon in his hand clearly, and have already fallen, with the unpredictability of the changes, he displays moves of powerful and unconstrained style^[2], an appearance like that of frost, pieced together with the fiercely unparalleled swordsmanship, seems to

be very abnormally deceptive, amongst all those present, not one was not alarmed.

The phantom soldiers were starting to panic, one of them who appears to be the leader, notices that Lin Rui En is only using one hand, it is very clear that he is protecting the woman on the horse, loudly swallowing down his panic, he makes a few hand gestures, to outflank them from the left, their target – Gui Wan.

Lin Rui En suddenly feels a little strained, his left side was growing unbearable, more and more phantom soldiers were surrounding them, taking Gui Wan into consideration, there is no way to break out of this, his brows were deeply knitted together, and his hand increases in strength, from his hand, a silver light flashes before them, suddenly creating the feeling of a screen splitting open, Gui Wan was blinded for a moment, and using this chance, Lin Rui En kicks at the stirrup of the horse, charging away.

Just when they had almost escaped, it was but a split of moment, when the horse was suddenly hit by surprise, bolting ahead in a mad rush, Lin Rui En tightly pulls at the reins, only by lowering his head, did he find that the horse's leg had been hit by an arrow, it was too late to care for the horse, he tightens his grip on the reins, and the sword in hand suddenly halts. The phantom soldiers takes the opportunity to close in, all blades directed towards Gui Wan's body, Lin Rui En tightly holds Gui Wan in his embrace, he moves to the side, and his blade lands upon the horse's body, struck by the pain, the horse wildly jumps around in chaos, completely out of control, it runs around like crazy.

Gui Wan holds her breath, tightly clutching onto Lin Rui En, her brain could no longer keep up, only able to let the clashing of swords wave around before her eyes, she suffers a shortness of breath, her life hanging by a thread.

In a blink of an eye, the horse is bolting towards the bottomless valley of the mountain slope, galloping up to this point, even Lin Rui En could not help but to show a change of expression, he wanted to turn back, but the phantom soldiers were closely approaching, there is no way they could back away any further, the horse is far beyond uncontrollable. Lin Rui En takes a deep breath, wanting to make a turn back, a blade light flashes from the left, turning around now, Gui Wan will definitely be injured, sighing out loud, he dodges the fatal blade, the horse's hooves raises, treading into the emptiness of the cliff.

Lin Rui En holds Gui Wan in a tight embrace, two people, one horse, had not even the time to scream, when they had already fallen into the deep valley......

In the evening, at a pavilion ten li^[3] from Feng Qi slope, a group of imperial guards has set up camp, a jade-like figure stands tall and straight in the pavilion, casually flipping through the booklet in his hand, he appears elegantly casual and free, with a smile like that of spring breeze in March hanging on his face.

A shadow hurriedly enters the pavilion, one knee kneeling down, breaking out into a report: "Prime Minister, the situation at Feng Qi Slope is coming to an end. Fire arrows have been prepared, discharge will be launched on command."

Lou Che gently smiles, "The mistresses of the back palace have not been frightened right?" His voice sounding lazy, as though he did not really care.

The soldiers does not even raise his head, answering with utmost respect: "They have not been frightened, and are resting two li away from this place."

"What about the Empress?" Lou Che quietly asks.

The soldier momentarily pauses, not knowing exactly how he should answer, he opens his mouth with an expression of great difficulty: "The Empress has already been put under General Lei's watch."

Lou Che smiles, his eyes looking in the direction towards Feng Qi Slope, even when watching from afar, he can still faintly see the glowing of the fire flames.

Seeing his smile, the soldier was baffled, the man before him, who makes people feel as though they're sitting in the warm spring breeze, just exactly what kind of person is he? Suddenly leading imperial guards to intercept the Empress and Consort Ying early this morning, placing the Empress under light detainment, clearly aware of the phantom soldiers waiting ahead, yet still let a group of palace maids and eunuchs to act as decoys, sending them to their deaths, no wonder why there is none who dares to make an enemy out of him amongst the entire imperial court.

"If no errors have occured, then just go ahead with the plan. After some time has passed, release the arrows, and completely annihilate the rebel party." Such refined voice and tone breaks through the soldier's disorderly thoughts. [4]

The soldier nods his head and was just about to accept the orders and withdraw, when he suddenly thinks of a certain matter, but does not know whether to speak of it. Upon seeing this, Lou Che asks: "What's wrong? Are there other matters?"

The soldier's face stiffens, answering: "Just now at Feng Qi Slope, a strange matter has occured."

"Strange matter?" Hearing this, Lou Che lets out a quiet little laugh, appearing to be rather curious, "What strange matter?"

"Just now, a man and a woman broke into Feng Qi Slope, and were besieged by the rebel party."

Lou Che continues to smile, musingly asking: "What kind of people were they, why were they besieged?"

"The rebel party mistook the woman as Consort Ying." The soldier answers with utmost honesty.

Eyebrows slightly knitting together, Lou Che murmurs: "Mistaken for Consort Ying?" Who exactly is this person?

The solider hears Lou Che's lowly spoken words, and appears to understand his thoughts, directly following on: "The people present says that, that woman's beauty is like that of the heavenly deities, it is no less than that of Consort Ying." At first the soldier had thought that this was yet another scheme of Prime Minister Lou, but later realised that this does not seem to be the case. The soldier raises his head ever so slightly, and sees Prime Minister Lou's face like that of the gentle spring breeze make a sudden change.

"What does that woman look like? Are there any specific characteristics?" Panic evidently laced around his voice, an ominous feeling suddenly shooting up his heart.

Secretly thinking, beauty like that of heavenly deities is a specific characteristic, is it not? Unfortunately, such words cannot be announced from his mouth, suddenly thinking of something, the soldier answers: "That woman wears a silver ribbon on her head."

Lou Che immediately freezes on the spot, his heart throbbing in pain, speaking

up, he asks: "How is she? Is she injured?" His voice losing its usual calm, and levelness.

The solider was beyond astonished, never, has he ever seen Prime Minister Lou like this before, not knowing how he should speak up, he could only speak of the facts: "That man and woman has already fallen down the valley." Dead or alive unknown – these four words sat at the tip of his tongue, thoroughly held back and swallowed back down, having been a soldier for so many years, he had long known how to sense the mood, the mood surrounding Prime Minister Lou in front of him was getting worse and worse, in face of such drastic changes, anymore words, and he's afraid the words 'dead or alive unknown' will become his own situation.

His heart grows increasingly painful, like an inexplicable sense of panic caging him in. For a while, Lou Che did not know how to react. Suddenly shooting up from his seat, he raises his voice: "To Feng Qi Slope, everyone to Feng Qi Slope. You must find me the woman who fell down the cliff. Bring her back to me completely unharmed." Having said that, he leaves with long strides, his face completely overcome with gloominess. A loud voice orders, "Immediately prepare the horse."

The soldier was dumbfounded, hastily following after him, asking: "What about the matter concerning the rebel party?"

Turning his head to coldly stare at the soldier, his voice sounds as though it has frozen into ice: "Find Gui Wan first!" Footsteps endlessly marches out. Thinking of Gui Wan being sieged by the rebel party, falling into the mountain valley, makes his heart feel as though flames of fury were surging out from his chest. He will definitely not spare those people.

The frostiness in his voice did not reduce when he faces the soldier again and adds: "Kill every last one of the rebel party."



Head really hurts, like that of million needles pricking the body and spreading into the mind from all four limbs. Her eyelids slowly raises, and the scene of vibrant spring enters the eyes, a faint touch of green, a thin layer of spring in the air, creating the feeling of nature naturally seeping into the one's heart and lungs, is this place the mountain valley? Gui Wan wonders, her eyes looking all around the place, searching for any trace of Lin Rui En.

Having looked around a good few times, there were still no signs of Lin Rui En's figure in sight, Gui Wan started to panic a little, propping her body up with one hand, she was overcome with a wave of dizziness, her hands and feet giving away, and she could not even stand up, with no strength anywhere, she could only rest against a rock, slowly adjust her breathing, she closes her eyes, calming her flustered heart.

"Have you awakened?" Such icy cold voice carries a trace of not easily detectable concern, travelling into Gui Wan's ears.

Turning her head, she sees Lin Rui En walking towards her, once she takes a good look at the other person, Gui Wan could not hold back her laughter, his clothes, most likely because of when they fell off the mountain slope, were in complete tatters, the usually cold general wearing such clothes, just shows an indescribable strangeness and degradation.

Noticing Lin Rui En's face show a change of colour, Gui Wan gathers up her smile, stilly looking at him.

His face revealing an expression of great difficulty, Lin Rui En single-handedly places horse meat on top of a large rock, and sits himself down, facing Gui Wan, he indifferently says: "You've slept for a day, I have circled this place to look around......" Suddenly coming to a halt, his brows knitting together, looking as though he does not know how to word it, ".....according to the current situation, we cannot climb back up."

Hearing this, Gui Wan shows a dejected face, thinking back to how she couldn't even stand up just now, her heart jolts, asking: "Why could I not stand up just now, could it be, when we fell down the valley, I injured myself?" Thinking up to there, no matter how carefree she can be, she could no longer laugh out loud.

Understanding her thoughts, Lin Rui En reveals a comforting smile, bringing out the shallow lines besides his lips, his somewhat icy face suddenly softens up quite a bit, "No need to worry, you have only lightly bruised yourself from the fall, with the addition of lying here for a day, your blood circulation is not as smooth, but after a while, you'll feel better."

His voice naturally has the sort of ability that convinces others, Gui Wan rubs her arms, slowly sitting herself up, indeed, she is feeling much better than before, a lot of her strength have already been restored, her heart finally settles down, and she raises her head to look at Lin Rui En, who was gathering the firewood together, stacking it up, he seems to be planning to roast the horse meat, all of a sudden, Gui Wan's face makes a change, slightly raising her voice, she asks in surprise: "Why are you not using your left arm?"

Lin Rui En uses his right hand to stack up the firewood, hearing Gui Wan's words, his movements does not falter, only calmly saying "When falling down, I received a light injury." His tone ever so calm and unaffected.

As if she'd be deceived by him so easily, Gui Wan secretly thought, if she had not seen the faint trace of dark red stain on his left sleeve, she too would have believed it is just a light injury, thinking back to when they were falling down, it was him who tightly covered for her, a sense of guilt fills her heart. Right now, she finally understands, the reason why they cannot climb back up the mountain valley.

Noticing that Gui Wan is no longer speaking, Lin Rui En focuses on stacking up the firewood, planning to roast the horse meat to eat, this is originally the warhorse that had accompanied him throughout the battlefields, now it is actually being used to feed them.....just thinking about it, he turns his head, making direct contact with Gui Wan's eyes which were carrying feelings of concern. Lin Rui En was a little startled, he was thinking too deep, to actually not be able to notice her closing in, in his moment of puzzlement, a pair of the most beautiful hands he had seen, lightly touches his left hand, originally wanting to avoid it, but not knowing why, in the end, he did not move the slightest bit as he stands there, allowing her to pull up his left sleeve.

Pulling up Lin Rui En's sleeve, Gui Wan's eyebrows deeply wrinkles, his left arm had a cut that opened up approximately half a foot of the arm, in the deepest area of the wound, one could even see the bone, a layer of ointment can be seen on top of it, the blood has also been stopped, but the horrible appearance of the wound was still able to startle her, deep inside, she felt that this wound, she may also need to bear half of the responsibility.

Raising her head to reveal a smile, Gui Wan quietly asks: "This wound, will it heal?"

Hearing the sincerity of her worries and remorse in her voice, Lin Rui En pulls down his sleeve, covering up that hideous wound, brightly speaking: "The bones have already been connected, nothing serious, it'll be good after two days of recovery once I get back."

Abruptly opening her eyes wide, Gui Wan looks at him as though she does not dare to believe it, a broken bone, and he is actually able to speak of it with such ease. Thinking for a moment, she walks up to the firewood and takes out two flat wood from the stack. Under the stunned eyes of Lin Rui En, she clips his arm between the pieces of wood. Lin Rui En was hit with the realisation, she is trying make a retainer for his left arm, in order to prevent the bone from misaligning. His heart is hit with a slight throb, as though warmth is slowly flowing out, spreading throughout his entire body.

Noting that there is no strips of cloth to bind the two pieces of wood together, Gui Wan was bit troubled, General Lin's clothes were already in tatters, she cannot rip his up, nor can she rip through her own clothes either. Her thoughts

takes a turn, and she reaches up to until the silver ribbon that she had been wearing this entire time.

A faint light flashes from the silver, and her head of silky black hair falls down instantly. Lin Rui En felt as though his own heart slid down along with it, as though captivated, his movable right hand reaches out, lightly skimming through a few strands that descended towards the front, all of sudden, because his left arm feels the clamping force of the firewood, a faint yet lingering pain could be felt, in his surprise, his right hand immediately withdraws, his heart uncontrollably pounding.

Unable to detect anything unusual, Gui Wan finishes tying up, her face displaying a pleased smile, and her hand casually reaches up to gather her loose hair, from the corner of her eyes, she catches a glimpse of the mountain valley, which actually happens to have a small pond, upon seeing this, her heart jumps in joy, and she quickly hurries over to it. Lin Rui En sees this, and was rather puzzled, thinking of the weak state her body is in, he was just about to call out to her, when he sees that she is only kneeling down beside the pond, looking into the mirror-like water, she combs through her long locks, tidying up her appearance, Lin Rui En was rendered speechless for a moment, unable to hold back, he lets out a faint laughter.

Turning back to continue stacking the firewood, he places the horse meat on top of the stack, opening up a lighter and starts a fire. Remembering that Gui Wan had slept an entire day without eating anything, he turns around, wanting to call out to her, yet in that short moment, he was unable to utter a word.

Because the mountain valley is of a special terrain, the temperature is able to preserve a strong sense of spring better, the scenery as beautiful as poems and paintings, however such beautiful scenery, standing next to her, can only become a shadow in contrast. Rosa Chinesis (Chinese rose) grows from the clear water, an ornament engraved by nature, her rouge and powder does not stick to her face, even more so revealing her peerless elegance.

Falling into deep thoughts, he involuntarily thinks back to when he had first seen her, because he was hunting down the Nu's Prince, he had to conceal himself in Lai Fu Restaurant, just when they were eating, a youngster suddenly joined their table, it was the first time he had seen such a pretty young man, his actions graceful and carefree, just one casual movement from "his" body would appear to carry a unique charm.

This alone was not enough to confuse him so much, but during that short meeting, that smile had indeed managed to move him, having been in battlefields for countless years, he had never seen such clear, carefree smile, so seeing "him" with a face of embarrassment and distress because of having no money to pay up, his heart softens up, thus helping "him" resolve the problem. He had originally thought that this was but one matter, but three days later, he actually happened upon another chance encounter with "him", opening the door, that peerlessly pretty young man shows up with a wide smile, the him that was standing by the door was truly confused. Finding out that 'he' is actually a woman, he involuntarily felt somewhat happy.

The third time seeing her, he had once again received another shock, she is actually Prime Minister Lou's wife. Seeing her step out from within the horse carriage with such graceful bearing, his feelings at the time were so complex that even he did not know how to decipher it.....

"What are you thinking about?" A voice like that of a bird song enters his ears, awakening him from his deep thoughts, he looks over towards Gui Wan, who had already plaited her hair into one long braid, elegant and natural, looking like a nymph that had come out from within the mountains.

Noticing that she appears to be in very high spirits since they fell down the mountain valley, such that when compared to the panic and helplessness from before, when they were rushing to Feng Qi Slope, there is a huge difference of worlds apart, she appears to be no longer troubled by the major happenings that are happening in the outside world. Secretly amazed, he could no longer hold back from asking: "Are you not worried?" Having said that, he immediately regrets it, now that she is finally in high spirits, how could he have just remind her of the unhappy matters, and now that he wants to compensate for this, he does not even know what to say.

Looking slightly dejected, she makes a turn and heartily smiles, "There's no longer anything for me to worry about. The matter has already reached a foregone conclusion, has it not?" Her smile, although brilliantly bright, faintly

reveals a sense of loss.

Lin Rui En lightly nods his head, not knowing what to say at that moment, he suddenly smells the scent of horse meat, and changes the subject: "Looks like the horse meat is almost done."

Not long after, the horse meat has been nicely roasted.

The horse meat was rough, difficult to eat, this just may be the worst meal Gui Wan has eaten in her life, but in her starving state, she simply could not refuse to taste it, and insisted on swallowing it down. Lin Rui En sees her discomfort in eating, and his heart could not bear it, speaking up: "Just wait for two more days, and we'll be able to return."

"One day." Not minding the doubts in Lin Rui En's eyes, Gui Wan confidently states, "Within a day, the people above will come here to find us." In that moment of eye contact, such confident smile shone splendidly on the person.

Lin Rui En says nothing, his eyes inadvertently sweeps around the surrounding area, this valley floor that makes people forget the social customs, actually allowed feelings of yearning to sprout from within him.

Gui Wan eats the horse meat, eating without tasting, her face beaming, a smile gracing upon it, with downcast eyes, she covers up the underlying sense of loss and melancholy, and from her peripheral vision, she glances over the valley, feeling somewhat frustrated, such refined and natural scenery, even she had given sprout to feelings of attachment to this place.

Unfortunately, in the world above, there are too many events that are awaiting her.

- [1] The actual phrase used for a **deceitful appearance** is **biǎo lǐ bù yī /** 表里不一 which literally means, **the outer appearance and the inner character does not match up**, it can also translate to two-faced but that sounds a bit too harsh in this context.
- [2] A powerful and unconstrained style the actual phrase used here was tiān mǎ xíng kōng /天马行空 which literally translates to a heavenly steed soaring across the skies.

- [3] Lǐ/里 is a measuring unit for distance, it's approximately half a kilometre
- [4] **Disorderly thoughts** is a very simplified translation for **hú sī luàn xiǎng /** 胡思乱想 which literally translates to **[making] rash thoughts, thinking all over the place**.

Aw our general is just so considerate and dependable here, so swoon worthy~ >< I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter too, I know most you were really excited for his appearance, and there you have it! Haha this chapter has actually been nicely split and the first half is practically dedicated to all you general lovers, so I hope you guys enjoyed it, savour the moment~~ ^^

Also the image I used for the valley is of a place called Jiuzhaigou 九寨沟 which is literally one of the most beautiful places in the world, especially in winter, omg it just looks so amazing! I probably could have chose a better picture but oh well, it's definitely a place that you guys should check out if you're interested in places of beautiful nature or the scenic landscapes you see in ancient Chinese dramas haha

Part 2



CHAPTER EIGHT

Between Life And Death (Part Two)

On Feng Qi Slope, the imperial guards were constantly busy with the task in hand, one soldier was running around as he gave out commands, besides him, another soldier suddenly speaks up in interception: "Vice-Captain, is it possible to give the soldiers a rest, it has already been an entire day and night, our fellow brothers are all tired."

The soldier addressed as Vice-Captain shows a face of reluctance, he could not help but to look towards the left where the high slope was, without even making a move, he turns his head to answer: "No resting. Have you not seen Prime Minister Lou's face, do none of you want to live anymore?" Thinking back to how reporting back to the Prime Minister yesterday has resulted in this, he secretly lets out a sigh. Ever since he realised that the one who fell down the valley was Madam Lou, Prime Minister Lou immediately entered a state of icy wrath, and as time goes on, he is looking worse and worse.

The reporting soldier also feels an infinite amount of mixed feelings, quietly speaking of his complaints: "This huge fire at Feng Qi Slope has been fuelled for longer than a day before it was finally extinguished, even the skies have already darkened now, there's just no way for us to go down in search for people."

Hearing this, the vice-captain also lets out a sigh, saying: "There's no other choice, if we really can't find the person, we can only be afraid that....." The following words just couldn't be spoken out loud, just thinking of it would give one the chills.

The soldier was helpless, glancing over towards the area the prime minister stands, an inexplicable chill running up his spine, he suddenly turns his head back and says: "Oh yeah, what do we do about that youth?" His voice low, revealing a hint of weariness.

The vice-captain raises his brows, the thought of the youth who rushed here by horse, during late noon yesterday, brought upon a headache. Ever since the prime minister notified his residence of the matter regarding Madam Lou's fall down the mountain valley, at noon, a young man came rushing in by horse, just when he had dismounted from the horse, the horse because of being overworked, dropped dead, thinking back to that scene, he can still vividly picture it in front of him.

A youth like that, anyone who sees him would not be able to forget him, they say he is the prime minister's star pupil, a man of talent, what is even more rare is his characteristic quality, like that of pure water, he truly is a delicately handsome young man ah! Being a soldier for so many years, only in these past two days did he manage to see the most outstanding characters. Yesterday, he was even wondering, could it be that all the outstanding characters have all gathered within the Lou Estate?

Someone like that approachable yet handsome youth, no one would dislike right? Once he had arrived, he was extremely anxious, as though there was some kind of painful suffering haunting him, hence him insisting on heading to the bottom of the valley. Clearly a frail scholar, who would dare to let him take such dangerous risk, not to mention that Feng Qi Slope yesterday was still engulfed in flames, and then the most bizarre thing happened, that youth appears to have transformed into stone as he stands on the mountain slope all night, eating

nothing, drinking nothing, saying nothing, seeing him again this morning, he looks like a completely different person from yesterday.

Seeing him yesterday, he was a youth with incomparable purity, such handsomeness had even slightly crossed the boundaries of gender, but the him today, with hair that's long been blown into a mess by the wind, his face a little haggard, the crystal clear eyes of yesterday were now filled with deep and heavy feelings, with an added touch of ice-like chilliness. Has the youth turned into a man overnight? Can one night really change someone this much?

"Vice-Captain, that youth is truly frightening, he was not like this yesterday." A solider speaks up in helplessness, "He's already not eaten anything for an entire day and night, should we send something over to him?"

The vice-captain nods his head, then again, shakes it, saying: "Leave it to me." He takes hold of the bamboo basket from the soldier's hand, and walks towards the slope edge on the right, he had yet to reach the youth, when the youth turns his head to him, asking: "Can we head down the valley yet?" Just a day before, he still had a clear and crisp voice, today, it already changed into a tone of frost-like cold.

Shaking his head, the vice-captain was just about hand over the food, but sees the youth turn away without a single glance at it, just continuing to stare down the valley, letting out an exasperated sigh inside, the vice-captain observes the youth, originally wanting to make a move, when he suddenly thought that any persuasion is of no use right now, and so he keeps his mouth shut.

The youth's hair is swept up by the mountain-side wind, one half of his face has stiffened up overnight, his eyes because of his fixed determination appears indomitable, deep and unfathomable, his finely chiselled facial features lost its water-like clearness and purity, but has instead gained an indescribable touch of emotionlessness and stubbornness, one overnight change has revealed a different type of sinister handsomeness to him, making others unable to look away.

This is Feng Qi Slope, standing here, one can have the entire mountain valley reflected in their eyes, the skies have long darkened, only a vast scene of black

can be seen, like looking down a bottomless black hole, unable to see anything, he stands still, for a long long time, exactly how long has it been?

The winds were very strong, like bursts of roaring by the ear, all other sound can no longer be heard. She is down there, at the bottom of the valley, did anything happen to her? Once he thinks of such things, his heart would suffer great pain, as though he's lost a piece of it, a truly unforgettable pain^[1], paining him to such extent, he can no longer think, only able to stand aside, helpless as he absently stares down the deep valley.....

That day, he first met her, it was also a dark night like this.....

.....

The performance troupe was heading into the imperial palace to deliver an opera performance, the troupe leader was extremely excited, saying how Kun Yuan Performance Troupe will be the number one troupe from hereon, everyone within the troupe were exceptionally happy, only him, only he was unable to integrate into the happiness.

He was born in a declining scholarly family, living in poverty since young, perhaps it is because of the influence of his father, he has no desires nor demands by nature, and everyone praises his generous and pure temperament, but who would have thought that he is also as deep as water inside, clear and transparent, selfless, anyone can be reflected on the water surface, but once the person leaves, their traces will also disappear, all along, he has been searching, what is it he himself wants? Exactly who will be able to leave a lasting impression in his heart?

The imperial banquet has started, he hides away in a far off location, finding a peaceful place to read his book, who would have thought, he would actually witness the most taboo scene within the palace grounds, he waits for them to leave, when he had just thought the trouble have left afar, he encounters her. Within the darkness, he could not see her face, it was only her clear, indifferent, yet carefree voice that he had taken a little liking to.

Are you willing to leave the performance troupe and come with me?

She has spoken of the matter he had wanted to do most, at that time, he had

long grew weary of the environment within the performance troupe, and have already decided to apply for the imperial examinations, perhaps being a government official will be extremely interesting, that is what he thought at that time.

His future suddenly turned bright, yet his mind still remains unperturbed, he was not exactly overjoyed, only naively accepting, a change of environment, could perhaps help him find something precious, he has always believed in this.

The woman who changed his fate is called Gui Wan, everyone says she is a great beauty, at the very beginning, he did not notice this, he had only really liked listening to her voice, so clear, so light, carrying irresistible grace that moves the hearts of others, having grown accustomed to hearing it, he actually longs to hear it again, to be able to hear this kind of voice every day, is perhaps a delightful thing, when did it begin, her voice has hooked onto his heart.

Only when thinking back to the scene of her in the plum forest, does he truly understand the meaning of beauty, the spring air splendid, her laugh like the spring breeze, vague joy moving the hearts of others; summer woods lush green, she is quiet like rainstone, elegant and graceful; autumn leaves quietly worries, she is lonely like the night moon, luminous and intoxicating; winter snow looking bleak, she is proud like plum blossoms, delightfully shining.

That night, he wanders amongst the plum forest again......

Since when, was the lingering fragrance of plum wine in his nose, difficult to forget?

Since when, was his brush strokes of feelings, his reciting of Spring Thoughts, difficult to give up?

Since when, was the constant rippling of his heart like a water mirror, difficult to calm down?

He originally had no desires nor demands, but after meeting her, he had actually formed some sort of sentimental attachment, such that he himself finds difficult to understand. She often asked, if he does not have confidence in himself, how is he to enter officialdom? At the bottom of his heart, he seems to have a vague answer that he is almost certain with, yet not just once, not just twice, but three times, he has repeatedly ignored it. Exactly what is it? He does

not understand, nor does he really want to understand.

The heavens are punishing him now, him letting her go back then, led to the news of her falling down the valley, dead or alive unknown. The moment he heard the news, he was pretty much already dead, his heart pained to the point that it no longer beats, and only then did he come to realise, his mirror-like heart that is as clear as water, could actually feel pain......

Never wanting to experience that heart-breaking pain again.....he silently stares down towards the bottom of the valley, waiting, as time goes on, his heart becomes increasingly determined. Nineteen years, and this is the first time he felt like this, he must be growing increasingly greedy, originally only wanting to hear her voice, gradually wanting to admire her beauty, and later wanting to be the one by her side.....how much he wants to have her......

He wants to laugh, wants to let out a big hearty laugh, he has found his own thing to hold onto, his precious, such bright and clean heart is no longer empty from hereon; he also wants to cry, wants to pour out his heart in tears, turns out he did not know, love is such a sour taste, such unspeakable anguish.....

"We've found her, we've found Madam Lou....." The sound of voices suddenly travels into his ear, awakening him from his chaotic mind-set of such crazy desires, his feet uncontrollably heads towards the voices, his long been numbed legs, gradually speeds up with every step, escalating into a jog, within the mingling of voices, he can hear the sound of his own heartbeat, strong, steady, his heart is beating again, he can feel his own heart beat again......

He has found it, found something he wants to treasure.....

What he wants is......

"We've found her, we've found Madam Lou....." Soldiers hurriedly rushes uphill from the valley, shouting at the top of their lungs, voices of joy instantaneously spreading throughout the whole of Feng Qi Slope.

Hearing this, Lou Che's face finally loosens up, first overjoyed, then immediately worried, with another change, showing a slight sense of outrage...... his expression goes through three changes at once, his emotions unstable,

without waiting for all the other soldiers to become aware, he had already sprinted out in flying style, directly heading towards the edge of the valley cliff.

The skies has only just dimly lit up, a commotion rises at the edge of the valley, having found Madam Lou, all the soldiers present could feel sincere happiness flowing out from within, they have not slept for two days, finally, they can get some rest.....seeing Prime Minister Lou disorderly rush over, everyone knew to make way for him.

The one who had just been rescued from below, sits at the edge of the valley cliff, and for the first time, he sees Gui Wan appear in such a sorry state, her clothes in a somewhat worn-out mess, her complexion pale, his heart throbs in pain, as though needles were pricking him all over his body. His face appears gloomy, originally planning to give her a round of merciless scolding, but seeing the state she is currently in, the pent up fury filling his chest could only come out in form of a long sigh, lowering his body to gather her in his arms, pulling her into his embrace, he gently asks: "Are you hurt?"

This one phrase, with such simplicity, was actually overflowing with incredible warmth. Not knowing why, it just sounds like water in general, just one drip, would drip into the depths of Gui Wan's heart, spreading all over her, with a face of complexity, heart wringing in pain, she had yet to react when she sees Lou Che painfully, dearly, reaching out to gently wipe her face, and only then did she realise, the tears were already spilling out from her eyes.

One drop, two drops.....the tears continues to fall, even she does not know why she is crying, is this the fear of standing between life and death? Is it the powerlessness, the helplessness of sorrows? Or is it.....

Seeing her silent tears, another round of throbbing shakes his heart, he reaches up to wipe her tears, wanting to help her wipe away her sorrows and fear, but when his hand reached out, he could feel the pain and burning sensation on his hand, those tears, were really heavy.....

Lightly holding her, not caring about the surprised eyes surrounding him, Lou Che could feel a burst of rattling in his heart. Just about to lift her up and turn around, he suddenly notices that by the valley cliff, one soldier is carrying another person on his back, could that be the man that fell down the valley with

Gui Wan? Watching as he gets rescued, he glances over, a flash of faint silver greets the eyes, his injured arm appears to be tied up with Gui Wan's hair ribbon, gazing for a long while, he catches a glimpse of the man's face, and freezes on the spot, is that not Lin Rui En?

Meeting Lin Rui En's eyes, holding a fair amount of indifference, this person stands on the same power level as he, unfortunately he is often outside, and the two people have never socialised with one another, his thoughts makes a turn, a little shocked as to why he and Gui Wan would be together. Unfortunately this is not the time to pursue the matter, Lou Che calmly speaks: "General Lin, is your injury serious?"

A face like frost shows no signs of change, only responding with a few light nods, "It's nothing." Unconsciously, his eyes wanders over to the slender figure, seeing her turn her head upon hearing their voices, her face actually overflowing with tears, he immediately freezes, and his expression falters.

"General Lin," Gui Wan gently breaks away from Lou Che's embrace, feeling a little embarassed by her tears just now, she courteously smiles towards Lin Rui En as she speaks: "Thank you for your life-saving grace."

He unknowingly nods again, shocked by her tears, he could not possibly look away.

"General Lin." Lou Che's cold voice interrupts his gaze, Lin Rui En looks into his motionless eyes.

Lou Che pauses for a moment before finally opening his mouth, more or less unwilling, but is still grateful no matter what: "General Lin, you have saved my wife, and for that I am most grateful. From henceforth......if there is anything you need help in, just speak up, I owe you one."

Lin Rui En does not answer, and stands there, expressionless, as though those words has nothing to do with him whatsoever, a group of physicians who have long been on standby, rushes up at this moment, one after the other, surrounding Lin Rui En, inspecting his injury, treating his wound.

Towards his lack of response, Lou Che did not get annoyed, Lin Rui En is known for his indifference, he himself has already made a promise, and so doesn't care whether he accepts it or not. Feeling the cool breeze blowing in over the valley,

he hurried pulls Gui Wan in front of him, she had fallen down the valley, and now that it is early morning, the weather is cold, he is afraid that her body will feel unwell, wrapping his arm around her, he turns around to head back to camp.

Only when they turned around, did they realise a young man was standing behind them, seeing him, Lou Che and Gui Wan were equally stunned.

Since Gui Wan has been saved from the valley, she has remained a blank state, completely absentminded, particularly because she had just cried her eyes out, it feels as though she had cried away many things, her heart feeling empty, and her movements stiff like that of a wooden puppet, having hovered over the boundaries of life and death, it feels as though she has been cut off from the outside world for an entire generation, the moment she turned her head to see the youth, she was immediately startled awake, could it be that an entire generation has really passed by?

How did the youth go through such a huge change? Coldly standing amongst the wind, the wind lifts his messy hair, an entanglement of silk threads, the delicately pretty face has actually become somewhat stiff, his expression desolate, with an indefinable depression, his clear eyes appears very deep in this moment, seemingly bottomless at glance, his face has long lost its former water-like smile, as he stands there with no expression whatsoever, his entire being, reveals an overflowing quality of determination.

Surprised by his sudden change, Gui Wan dumbly asks: "Xiu Wen.....what's happened to you?"

Upon being called by that light and clear voice, Guan Xiu Wen feels a burst of joy well up from within, he has already stood there for so long, watching her tears fall, her blank state, her absentmindedness, he got the full view of it, but she did not notice him, he waits, finally waited till she gently calls out to him.

Within a flash, a voice like that of breaking ice seems to have been heard, Gui Wan widens her eyes, watching that youth reveal that approachable smile of his, like that of clear water, the fierceness from before appears to have been an illusion, the youth is still that same youth, he has not changed, sighing in relief, Gui Wan's mind was put at ease, the Guan Xiu Wen just now sure gives people quite the scare.

The youth joyfully laughs, laughing from deep inside his heart, taking a step forward, he gently asks: "Are you okay? Not hurt?" Waiting till Gui Wan specifically shakes her head twice, his heart settles down, he says nothing and just faintly smiles as he gazes at Gui Wan with some sort of complex implications.

The one who was truly shocked, is Lou Che. The moment he saw this youth, he felt a certain kind of odd sensation. This youth's state of mind has gone through a huge transformation, only then could he have become so eerily strange, so terrifying. His body carries blade-like fierceness, his eyes holding an additional sharp and focused quality, he notices that when looking at Gui Wan, his eyes reflects a sense of dreaminess in them, excessively deep, an unpleasant sensation washes over him, his heart, holds an additional trace of agitation, and he speaks up: "Guan Xiu Wen, you should be tired too, go take a rest." Having said that, he ditches everyone else and walks Gui Wan back to camp, at the same time, ordering a physician to enter the tent to treat Gui Wan.

Seeing that they have far left, Guan Xiu Wen's smile that was still ever so clear just now, suddenly drops, standing in the wind, coldly, silently, watching that lingering figure, his heart filled with mixed feelings, such that cannot be even more deeply felt than just now, he needs power, needs wealth, need position, all of sudden, he is filled with an infinite amount of wants.

He wants to have power that can compete with Lou Che.....to be able to get close to him.....

On top of Feng Qi Slope, there is yet another hectic scene. The soldiers were taking care of several trivial situations, the physicians endlessly walking in and out of the tents, countless soldiers rests above the valley, and one youth stands amongst the wind, undisturbed and lonely......

The skies were beginning to brighten up, unfortunately no one raised their heads, no one realised, the skies had already long been raging on, like a storm.....



"How's the situation?" A

voice like light breeze seeming a little worried, Lou Che stands in front of the tent, consulting with the physician beside him.

"Madam's qi and blood have weakened, and has also received a fright," The physician looks at the powerful yet young prime minister before him, feeling a little aimless and panicky, having been a physician in the palace for so many years, he has never seen him make such an obvious show of emotions before, in a humble tone, he says, "Madam's health condition is nothing serious, just need to spend a good amount of time to recuperate, and all shall be fine."

His wrinkled brows loosens up, Lou Che lightly nods his head, "Go prepare the prescription." He makes a sudden turn, lifting the tent's curtain, and walks in.

The inside of the tent was filled with complete silence, with not even the slightest noise, nerve-soothing aroma wafts into his nose as he takes serious steps to the table side, lifting the lid of the censer, and stubbing out the incense inside. Lou Che turns around, his eyes steadily settling on the bed in the middle of the tent, a layer of sheep wool blanket is spread across the bed, and in that moment, the image of the slim figure, sinking into deep sleep, lying there with her black hair sprawled across the snow-white blanket, carries the appearance of a slightly pale beauty in a morbid state.

He walks up to the bedside and lightly sits down, gently pulling up the wool blanket, pulling it up to Gui Wan's neck, tightly covering her up, suddenly, the blanket in hand makes a move, his eyes looks up, just happening to meet eyes with Gui Wan's flickering ones. Slowly opening her eyes, those translucent black pupils like that of stars, appears deep.

"Lord Husband....." Gui Wan softly calls out, her mind still in a daze.

Lou Che looks at Gui Wan, but does not answer, his face showing no expression, seeing that she wants to sit up, he takes a pillow, and cushions it against her back.

Seeing his lack of expression, Gui Wan comes to a realisation, asking: "Lord Husband, are you mad at me?" Having just sat up straight, her head felt as though it was spinning, and she leans back against the embroidered pillow.

A mind filled with unspeakable complications, Lou Che displays a face of a slightly cold front, upon noticing Gui Wan's physical discomfort, his heart felt inexplicable distress, and he could no longer hold back a light scolding: "Do you not want your life? Why must you have come here?" So close, and she would have passed away at the bottom of the valley.

Gui Wan meekly smiles, "I wanted to come in prevention, but only when I got here, did I realise how useless I am." Such faint voice carries such heavy feelings of lamentation and grief.

To hear such sorrowful words, was not something Lou Che had expected, the originally harsh words he wanted to say, could no longer bear to leave his mouth, seeing this woman, whom he has been protecting and doting on in every possible way, to actually do something so dangerous, has made him experience more than enough worries in his lifetime. He wants to reprimand her, but in a mood where he cannot bear to do so, he could only let out a light sigh, helplessly asking her: "Gui Wan, why do you care for the Empress' matter this much?"

Gui Wan smiles after thinking for a long while, at the moment when Lou Che had thought she would not answer him, she leisurely speaks up: "Then why does Lord Husband care for the Empress' matter this much?"

Lou Che was speechless, getting the feeling that he should not say it, but seeing Gui Wan's slightly pale complexion, he says: "It is not that I am deliberately opposing the Empress, everything that happened today were the results of her own doings." After saying such heavy words, his tone softens down again, "Gui Wan, you do not need to concern yourself with this matter any further, I will take care of it." His hand reaches up to run through her long locks, and then helps her pull up the blanket, afraid that the chilliness on Feng Qi Slope

would make her ill on top of her injury.

"Cannot not care....." In Lou Che's rather surprised eyes, Gui Wan softly speaks up.

Lou Che lifts his brows, his heart receiving an endless amount of shock, not waiting for him to speak, Gui Wan continues: "Lord Husband, can you listen to a story of mine?"

Knowing that, for her to tell a story at this precise moment, it must be of utmost importance, Lou Che says nothing, and silently waits.

Gui Wan's eyes looks away, her attention focused on the censer on the table, as she slowly speaks: "My mother, was a famous beauty twenty years ago, free and easy-going by nature, and also rather bold and vigorous....."

Lou Che was slightly startled, remembering that at the time they got married, Gui Wan's father had just resigned from his government position, leaving with clean hands (uncorrupted)^[2], without even attending his daughter's wedding. As for her mother, he has only heard that she passed away a few years ago. Not understanding why she would choose to speak of her personal life at this precise moment, he wonders, could it be that there's a certain revelation within this? Attentively watching her reveal an appearance of hazily drifting away, he carefully listens on.

"When mother was young, she once loved a failed scholar (fail as in failed in the imperial examinations). Not caring for her family's opposition, she married him, and even gave birth to a daughter. However, the two of them did not live a happy life together, and mother later left that man, marrying my father." A few simple sentences, outlined the life of one woman, yet deep inside it leaves only a bleak taste. Hearing up to this point, Lou Che's brows slowly knits together, somewhat able to guess the implications behind this story.

Gui Wan takes a little pause, flashing a wry smile as she speaks again: "At home, I have never seen mother be truly happy before, she would always be filled with worries, rarely cracking a smile. She really doted on me, could be said to be excessively favoured, but towards older brother, she would not even look at him. Contrarily, father liked older brother, disliked me.....mother was in a very

poor physical condition, when I was fourteen years old, she had already fallen gravely ill. Although father went looking everywhere in seek of medical attention, she was still beyond curable. Before mother died, she really wanted to see the forsaken daughter she had left for over a decade. She told me, she has given her doting love for that daughter to me in double, hoping that I'd be able to give these feelings to that un-fateful older sister in future." Speaking up to here, Gui Wan pauses for a long while, seeming to no longer plan on speaking any further.

Lou Che freezes, the answer seems to have already came out, he asks in confirmation: "You're older sister....."

Gui Wan turns her head, steadily looking at Lou Che, and softly says: "Have you not already guessed it? The Empress is the person I need to return the love to." Within such joyously carefree eyes, there holds assertiveness.

A moment of silence falls upon the inside of the tent, Lou Che did not know how to respond, and could only look at Gui Wan, her face exposing an expression of thoughtfulness.

Gui Wan flashes a soft smile, her hand reaches up to gather her hair, asking in a seemingly relaxed manner: "Lord Husband......what to do?"

Lou Che looks at her in slight puzzlement, an ominous feeling washes over him, causing him to feel a little troubled, and in this moment, he could not utter a single word.

"What are we to do.....?" Gui Wan laughingly says, some sort of mournful feeling wells up inside of her, "I need to protect the Empress, you need to protect Consort Ying, perhaps our stances will become antagonistic....."

"It wouldn't." A decisive judgement cuts off her speculations, Lou Che authoritatively says, "This is originally not a problem between us." His heart is troubled, bursting with troubles. Never has he ever thought, he would hear the word "antagonistic" come out from her mouth, making him feel as though his heart suddenly sank.

"Gui Wan, the one opposing the Empress is not me, and is in fact, the one who is named monarch of the country, his majesty the Emperor, you got that?" Lou Che explains, with emotions of indefinable panic mingled into his words.

Gui Wan lets out a little laugh, showing her state of loss, she quietly says: "Without Consort Ying, would his majesty do this?"

Lou Che says nothing, the answer to this question is too obvious, giving him no room to turn the situation around.

Time passes by in minutes and seconds, yet inside this tent, there seems to be the feeling of frozen time, one could faintly feel a kind of oppressive air intensely pass off.

"Gui Wan....." Lou Che's lips part, only to lightly call out her name, his voice gentle but low.

Hearing this, Gui Wan could not help but to gently quiver, feeling a burst of severity, yet her face continues to carry a smile, "Lord Husband has once promised me, you would satisfy everything I want.....I have always believed this. But, what if it's an interest that affects Consort Ying, would Lord Husband continue to stand by my side?"

The dreariness will soon suffocate him, the air so heavy, it can seemingly crush people. Lou Che does not speak, his face sombre, his thoughts undecipherable. Gui Wan lightly sighs, feeling tremendously tired, paining her head, paining her feelings, also, paining her heart......suddenly her entire body digs out from the wool blanket, she extends her hands, and in Lou Che's moment of surprise, she has hooked onto Lou Che's neck. With unlimited amount of charm and gentleness, she leans her head onto Lou Che's shoulder, three thousand black hair like silk threads, scatters down Lou Che's chest, thread after thread, strand after strand, "Husband......"

Frozen on the spot, he had almost forgotten to breath. Gui Wan never takes the initiative to get close to another, but in this moment, a faint fragrance rushes up his nose, lingering on his body, his pounding heart bursts, and his hand unconsciously strokes the black silk-like hair. He was surprised that he actually could not calm his heartbeat, wanting to greedily enjoy this charming moment. Gui Wan's intoxicating voice gently rings through his ear: "Thinking that one day, if we were to take antagonistic stand against one another, how emotionally and spiritually broken I will be ah......" Her voice was sweet, hooking onto his heart, yet it was impossible to conceal her helpless lamenting.

Lou Che could feel his neck area get a little humid, a little warm, droplets of water rolls into his collar. Such heat, seeming as though it will burn him, a strange and bitter feeling spreads out, leaving his heart to restlessly sink down.....

Gui Wan withdraws her hands, leaning backwards, hence instantaneously leaving Lou Che's embrace as she leans against the embroidered pillow, facing Lou Che rather absentmindedly.

The fragrance suddenly disappears, the warmth no longer there, in a moment of shock, he wanted to reach out to grab, but was only able to hold onto a few strands of hair. Lou Che looks at Gui Wan, startled, but all he saw were her deep eyes like stars, holding hidden tears, he sees himself, but her focus was set elsewhere. Her lips like that of half a plum blossom, carrying a hint of a smile that cannot be seen, beautiful yet greatly desolate.

His heart feels empty, slightly aching, he extends his hands, grabbing onto the person in front of him, and strongly pulls her into his arms, "Gui Wan.....we will not turn against one another."

Sensing that the person in his arms uneasily wants to retreat, he hooks onto her waist, holding her even tighter, his heart was in chaos, and he mutters: "Gui Wan.....what am I to do with you?"

What am I to do with you?

In heaven's recording of the second year in spring, the case of "Hu Guo Temple" has reached its end. The annihilation of three hundred people in the rebel party, has been identified, this matter has very extensive implications, the Elder Statesman was also said to be involved. The Emperor was furious, many officials who were under the Elder Statesman's Estate were demoted. Originally thought that the Empress would be deposed, but unexpectedly, a group of senior officials simultaneously stepped forward in plea, deeply expressing the Empress' innocence, and so the Empress' title was saved, the back palace has also restored its peace.

In a blink of an eye, it was already late spring, and the national imperial examinations has begun. The "Hu Guo Temple" matter did not affect the

examination, everything went along as planned.

The common people of the Capital were particularly excited this year, the only reason being, the First Ranked Scholar of today is extraordinarily handsome, young and talented, having quite a similar bearing to that of Prime Minister Lou back then, they say that he is the student of none other than Prime Minister Lou himself, all of a sudden, the imperial court and the entire Capital was bustling, conversation topics all turning to this.

This year, topping the list of the imperial examination is the one named, Guan Xiu Wen, at this time, no one knew, the arrival of this youth, will bring upon trials and hardships^[3] to the entire city.

- [1] Unforgettable pain kè gǔ míng xīn / 刻骨铭心 which literally translates to, engraved on the bones, imprinted on the heart, it is used to describe the pain in this context, but the keyword is unforgettable, the phrase refers to something that has been engraved in your heart and soul, thus making it impossible to forget. Generally speaking, it is a phrase used to express eternal gratitude.
- [2] The actual phrase that was used here was **liang xiù qīng fēng /**两袖清风 which literally translates to **both sleeves swaying with every gentle breeze**, emphasising the emptiness of these sleeves which you should know were also used as pockets back then and although the phrase can be used to refer to poor people, it is also a phrase used to describe an **honest official who is free from corruption and bribery**.
- [3] When speaking of **trials and hardships**, Chinese people usual refers to this as **wind and rain** or **fēng yǔ /** 风雨. A phrase that's most often used for this, would only require the doubling up of both characters us Chinese and our love for using four character phrases haha **fēng fēng yǔ yǔ /** 风雨雨

When Guan Xiu Wen was first introduced to the story, I purposely refrained from talking about him, just in case I accidentally leak any spoilers and because I want you guys to really feel the mix of feelings you get from his unexpected change. I really love how the author has written this part, his transformation from the innocent youth that Gui Wan happened upon, to the sinister

(borderline psychotic) man vying for Gui Wan's heart(?) Note the question mark there 'cause I'm actually questioning whether he even cares to try winning Gui Wan's heart, he seems to have gotten to the point of obsession with her, that he is blinded by his greed of wanting her, forget winning her heart, he just wants to obtain her, to do so, he desires power and will do whatever it means to gain it in order to compete with Lou Che. His transformation here happens so unexpectedly, it happens so fast but not at all rushed, the author did so well in expressing the build up of his thoughts and feelings leading up to his final resolution, and such a quick change in him actually backs up this new sense of danger he carries. He's definitely one to be wary of now, but then I can't help but to sympathise with the way he became this way too, for someone to feel so empty in the heart to finally find something that he wants, but then the realisation of all this hits him so suddenly that he doesn't even know how to control his desires and so it instantly balloons into something so huge, maybe it can be controlled under careful guidance, he's practically like a newborn baby in this aspect of gaining a new feeling (of having desires), but without the right nurturing it definitely wouldn't turn out well, and I can say for sure that officialdom is not the right environment for nurturing something as dangerous as desires...anyhow, Guan Xiu Wen just gives me so much mixed feelings right here, and it will definitely stir towards the negative side soon.

I know most of you guys are on General Lin's side and as much as I love him too, I cannot deny that Lou Che is most suitable for Gui Wan and is also the only person that Gui Wan's heart is willing to open up to whether she wants to or not. Although she is quite wary of his stance in a political sense, I believe that she has already grown to trust him as the *Lord Husband* who has sincerely been doting on her, caring for her. Gui Wan has grown so used to suppressing her emotions, never allowing others to see her in a weak state, she was naturally able to leisurely smile in front of General Lin despite her inner worries and fears, but the very moment Lou Che comes into the picture, those tears that she herself didn't even realise she was holding back, instantly breaks out, thus leaving our poor general in such a dumbfounded state. I think that this incident at Feng Qi Slope definitely marks the turning point in their relationship, Gui Wan expresses sincere pain at the thought of having to turn against Lou Che if their political stance calls for it (note how she actually calls him *Husband* for the first

time here, which is a more genuine addressment whilst *Lord Husband* expresses a leisurely/indifferent attitude towards their marriage), and having received such a huge scare of almost losing Gui Wan, Lou Che cannot bear the idea of losing her, although he does not outwardly says it, but he has actually already chosen Gui Wan over Yao Ying the very moment Gui Wan mentioned the idea of them taking antagonistic stance against each other. His heart has already chosen Gui Wan hence his self questioning at the end "Gui Wan.....what am I to do with you?" No matter what, there is no way the two can go back to playing brother and sister anymore at this point.....and well, I guess I will keep General Lin to myself then hehehe

Phew~I told you guys that chapter eight is just so action-packed right? Haha. There was also the revelation of Gui Wan's relationship with the Empress, which is yet another point I had to refrain from mentioning to avoid spoilers. Thankfully it was split into two parts, or my mind would have exploded with everything that happened in this one chapter lol.

Ok, deep breath, take a moment to let everything sink in now...

I realise my comment section has gotten wayyy too long so I'll just stop here hehe, I wouldn't even blame you if you ignored my entire rambling

As always hope you guys enjoyed the chapter! ^__^

Full



CHAPTER NINE

The Beauty In The Painting

"Prime Minister Lou...Prime Minister Lou..." Sounds of callings reaches his ears, Lou Che halts his steps, turning his head towards the cries. An elderly man dressed in a blue robe hurriedly runs towards him. He seems to be the old minister of three generations (served three Emperors), the late Emperor's extremely trusted Minister of Personnel, Yan Gang. Carrying a gentle smile, unmoving like a mountain, Lou Che waits for him to close in.

Once he reaches him, out of breath, Yan Gang's face appears red due to the sprinting, yet he still speaks ever so cheerfully: "Prime Minister Lou, I heard that the new First Ranked Scholar is your star pupil?"

Lou Che nods with a smile, seeing his breathing settle down, he walks towards the imperial court with prideful strides, behind him, Yan Gang hastily follows after him, continuing to exaggeratedly praise: "A man endowed with such extraordinary talents, it's quite like the you from back then, truly a hero amongst the youth." Thinking of the appearance of this new First Ranked Scholar, typically comparable to none, Yan Gang was filled with emotions, this is the age of young and talented......

Hearing him sound a sigh, Lou Che understands his thoughts, saying: "Yan is still ever so capable^[1], why the sigh?"

Hearing the words "still ever so capable", Yan Gang could not help but to cheer up, "How sothis is the new generation's world now....." invariably sighing, he suddenly remembers a matter of crucial importance and hastily speaks up, "Prime Minister Lou, do you by chance, know the Nu's emissary has already arrived at the Capital yesterday? He shall be entering the palace to meet his majesty today."

Lou Che lightly raises his brows, letting out one simple sound: "Oh?"

Seeing that he seems to be unaware of this matter, Yan Gang hurriedly explains: "The Nu and our country has fought for many years, and the war has never really stopped, but this time, it sure is strange, the Nu has actually sent an emissary here with good intentions, is there some sort of hidden meaning in this?" He has not slept all night, all due to his concerns towards this matter, today, he hurried over to the imperial court, desperately looking for Lou Che to discuss this.

Lou Che was also somewhat surprised upon hearing this, the Nu requesting a peace treaty, has not necessarily never happened before, but having just captured the Nu's Prince as hostage half a year ago, they had originally thought that, the Nu who are most faithfully committed towards grace and revenge, would exact their revenge without any restraint, who would have known that after such a long silence, they would actually come and request peace? Vaguely feeling that something is not right, but in this moment, unable to pick out the hidden meaning, Lou Che continues to faintly smile as he says: "This matter shall come to a clear understanding when we see his majesty in court."

Yan Gang nods his head, and both people enters the main hall at the same time.

Practically all the civil and military officials have already gathered here, the court buzzing with discussions. Before the Emperor arrives, everyone freely speaks their minds whilst discussing. Seeing Lou Che arrive, the discussions quietens down a lot, one after another, nodding their heads in greeting, if not, they will be deeply bowing towards him. Lou Che heads towards the area closest

to the dragon throne.^[2] Suddenly catching glimpse of a figure in crimson red, standing right at the most northern side of the large hall. It is the new First Ranked Scholar, Guan Xiu Wen. Guan Xiu Wen seems to have also sensed Lou Che's gaze and turns to see him, he respectfully lowers his head, greeting "Teacher", his voice neither loud nor quiet, just about good enough to be heard by Lou Che.

Lou Che vaguely sounds an "en", not saying a single word, his steps does not falter as he walks towards the centre of the hall, standing below the dragon throne, on the left side, standing side by side with Prince Duan.

Upon seeing Lou Che, Prince Duan loudly sounds a laugh, and speaks up: "I heard the Prime Minister's Estate has recently recruited several contemporary people of great capability and talents, Prime Minister Lou is so eager to learn, really makes me admire you."

"How so, Prince Duan is highly erudite, how could Lou Che dare to compare?" Lou Che answers back sarcastically, didn't think that Prince Duan is so clearly aware of matters within his estate, hearing Prince Duan bring up this matter, Lou Che also felt troubled.

The inviting of teachers within the estate, is actually all of Gui Wan's doing. Ever since the "Hu Guo Temple" case, the Empress may have saved her position, but within the palace, she is basically being held under house arrest. Over the past month, Gui Wan has never mentioned what happened inside the tent again, her behaviour is exactly the same as before, but he still feels something has changed, this time, she has suddenly invited several teachers from all parts of the land, all whom are famous contemporary educationists, schemers, tacticians, Lou Che felt rather restless deep down.

Regarding all matters, he has mostly been going along with Gui Wan, upon thinking that she has been recuperating her body for over half a month, he would get concerned, he does not wish to drag Gui Wan into this power vortex, and would rather protect her for a lifetime, if not for the Empress......bitterly smiling, Lou Che could feel a sense of helplessness, nothing remains the same in this world, this sentence is truly correct, didn't think that in between all this, he could actually pick out so many complex relationships. What exactly is it Gui

Wan wants to do?

Seeing Lou Che plaster on a gentle smile, his face looking no different, but is actually looking a little distracted, Prince Duan coldly laughs, and was just about to speak again, when a voice from outside echoes "His majesty the Emperor has arrived—"

Everyone in the hall immediately goes silent, all officials bowing to the ground, listening to the sound of footsteps, a warm voice sounds: "All ministers may rise." Everyone in the great hall immediately stands up, neatly aligned in two rows.

Lou Che stands at first spot on the left, indifferently watching the officials report court matters, his elegantly handsome face carrying an unmoving smile like that of the spring breeze, after a while, the reporting of court matters have almost come to an end, with no major happenings. The imperial court falls into silence, at this moment, a minister steps out from the right, reporting: "The Nu's emissary requests for your majesty's audience, it seems to be in request of a peace treaty."

The imperial court was instantly in an uproar, the Nu is originally a militant ethnic, for them to initiate a peace treaty, it is indeed strange.

The Emperor also felt rather surprised, rather hesitant, he habitually turns to the left, asking the first in line: "What does Minister Lou think?"

Taking on a respectful attitude, Lou Che says: "First allow the emissary to clearly state his purpose, it would not be too late to make a decision after." A spring breeze blew by, naturally bringing along a warmth that calms the people's hearts.

The Emperor nods his head, agreeing to the approach, he waves his hand, giving the Nu emissary, who has been waiting outside for a long time already, permission to enter.

From outside the hall, a Nu man slowly walks in, a well-built body, a resolute face, one look can tell he is considered a heroic figure. His attitude neither obnoxious nor humble, with vigorous steps, he walks to the centre of the hall, bowing a little bow towards the Emperor.

By the side, Yan Gang could no longer watch on, rebuking: "Seeing his majesty, why are you not kneeling down?"

The emissary's face remains stoic, his imposingly deep voice, powerfully resonates: "He is not my majesty, why should I kneel down?" Between his show of attitude, there was a strong force, making people dare not to belittle him.

Yan Gang was just about to say something again, when he was cut off by a wave of the Emperor's hand, the Emperor looks at the emissary, asking: "For what reason, have you come here from afar?"

"I am here under the Prince's orders, specifically to request a settlement."

The guessing from before was but one matter, but to personally hear it now, is yet another matter, an uproar immediately rises again within this imperial court, voices of opinions sounding from everywhere.

The emissary sees the officials quietly whisper amongst themselves, sees the stunned look on the Emperor's face, and follows on, saying: "The Prince has prepared three gifts for the Emperor of the Celestial Empire, in a show of sincerity towards a settlement."

His voice echoes throughout the hall, everyone turns their attention to him, looking at the emissary, the Emperor was also somewhat puzzled and doubtful. The Nu are militant, barbaric by nature, and has always been great trouble and suffering to the Celestial Empire, just like a malignant tumour that cannot be cut out, it has always been the Nu looting the border areas, the Celestial Empire has never taken anything from the Nu before.

Indecisively looking towards Lou Che again, he sees Lou Che steadily nods his head, all the other officials did not object either, and so he speaks up: "Serve up the gifts then."

Hearing this sentence, the emissary stands to the side, loudly calling out to the outside of the hall in the Nu's language, under the surprised eyes of the officials, four boxes were carried in.

The strange thing is, the first box was exceptionally large, requiring eight people on each side to carry it into the hall, as opposed to the second box, which was only as big as the palm of one's hand, the sharp contrast made everyone feel

curious. And the third one was a square shaped object covered in a thick cloth, the fourth one was a foot long, six inch wide box.

Was it not three gifts? Why are there four boxes? Everyone's minds were wondering this.

Not waiting for everyone's speculations, the emissary orders someone to open the first large box. As soon as it was opened, a faintly fresh aroma wafts out, everyone present looks towards the box, inside the box was actually the stump of a tree. People within the hall lets out a disappointed hiss, followed by another round of silence.

The emissary's expression remains unchanged, proudly stating: "This is the thousand year Tong Xian wood." Once spoken, a collected gasp sounds throughout the large hall.

This Tong Xian Wood is one of the world's rarest finds, it is also a rare piece in the lives of the Nu. This type of tree can help blood circulation, treats blood stasis, has the magic to delay aging, and is also said to detoxify the body, use this wood to create chairs, tables, wooden bowls, and all will be worldly treasures hard to come by, not to mention this is the thousand year Tong Xian wood. The first gift is indeed valuable.

No one speaks, seeing such a valuable treasure, they too believed the Nu's request for settlement is sincere. But there are still some lack of understanding, the Celestial Empire to the Nu does not hold military superiority, so the Nu's request for settlement is indeed really unconceivable.

Without waiting for the officials' reactions to subside, the second box that's only as big as one's palm was already opened, inside was a red coloured small flute. Seeing this, everyone was once again puzzled, but no one made strange noises this time, vaguely guessing that this object appears ordinary, but should also have a remarkable background.

The first one to react was General Lin Rui En, the moment the box was opened, he was immediately struck with shock, showing an expression of disbelief. This short flute is called Wan Xiao Flute (Absolute Elimination Flute), it is a flute that controls insects, to the Celestial Empire, in addition to having a well-built body and greater sturdiness, the Nu's most formidable factor, is their knowledge in

venomous insects. When battling the Nu, they would often encounter highly skilled individuals that are capable of controlling venomous insects, it truly is impossible to guard against, and it is only the Wan Xiao Flute's effect that can prevent this, just as long as it sounds, the insects will all retreat. It is indeed a treasure.

Hearing the emissary's explanation of the Wan Xiao Flute, everyone was overjoyed, never would have thought that such little flute, is actually able to solve such a migraine-inducing problem.

Amidst the noisiness, the third box has been opened, first lifting the cloth that covered the box, the box turned out to be full of holes, and then opening it. Within the large hall, the few ministers that were stood close to the box, clearly sees what is inside, and all of them steps back in fear, there was even one minister who screamed out loud. Turns out that inside the box, there lies a scorpion, an entire body glowing green, looking bizarrely horrific.

Amongst the gathering of people, no one was unafraid, only Lou Che, Prince Duan, Lin Rui En and a few others military commanders, also Guan Xiu Wen stood motionless, as stable as Mount Tai. The emissary lets out a contemptuous laugh, brightly saying: "This is our Nu's poison king of last year, called 'Bi Xue Xie' (Jade Snow Scorpion), as long as you eat this, no poison can affect you." Having said that, he casually closes the box.

Everyone felt a release of heavy burden, raising their heads towards the Emperor, the Emperor's expression appeared level-headed, his lips curving into a smile as he gently speaks: "I thank your Prince for his kindness, I shall accept it in appreciation." Saying that, he allows people to accept the boxes. The poor eunuch who took the poison scorpion box, even his legs were shaking.

Once all the boxes were taken away, the hall suddenly became more open and bright again, the officials have also all relaxed, with smiles hanging on their faces, whilst looking a little puzzled towards the fourth box.

Seeing everyone assessing the fourth box, the emissary says: "Emperor of the Celestial Empire, in order to express his sincerity, our Prince has gifted three treasures of the Nu, would Emperor be able to give the Nu a gift, in expression of your sincerity?"

The Emperor nods his head, saying: "That is but of course......" Seeing the emissary still have words to say, he stops speaking, waiting for the emissary's words.

The emissary raises his fist, formally bowing as he slowly says: "Our Nu Prince would like to request for someone from the Celestial Empire."

The Emperor freezes, the officials also freezes, secretly thinking: if the one he wants is Lin Rui En, their biggest enemy, do we still have to give him to them?

Whilst everyone were restlessly speculating, the emissary explains: "It is a woman." Upon hearing these words, everyone's face brightens up, so it is just a woman.

From the right side, a military commander laughs, loudly saying: "Nevermind one woman, even if it's one hundred women, there would be no problem." Hearing these words of his, the great hall bursts in hearty laughter.

Since the ancient times, reaching a settlement is not a strange matter, using women to exchange for peace also cannot be considered a big problem, thinking that it is just one woman, in exchange for peace, everyone in the great hall sighs in relief, they were originally thinking what kind of demanding condition the Nu would put forward.

The emissary walks up to the fourth box, extending his hand to open the box, this box is different to the others, compared to the three boxes before, it is much more precious, made with the high quality Yu Li wood, the borders were even inlaid with pearls all around, just from the box alone, one can see how much the Nu cherishes it.

The box opens, turns out that a roll of scroll lays inside, the emissary very carefully takes out the scroll, slowly unrolling it in the great hall, and everyone simultaneously look towards it.

Distinct sweetness passes through the assembly, earthly colours turns into nothing but dust.

These two sentences can be most appropriately used to describe the person in the painting, the painting depicts a beautiful woman in men's attire, her light smile graceful, with jade-like posture, fairy-like form, a blindingly brilliant stare, and limitless charms.

Everyone was thrown into surprise, they could not help but to indulge in the beauty in the painting. Suddenly hearing a sound of whisper, all officials returns to their right state of mind, standing on the left, Lou Che's expression shows a great change, overcast and unpredictable; and on the right side, Prince Duan twitches into a smile of interest, Lin Rui En also shows an expression of realisation, in such incomparably complex situation, a strange atmosphere suddenly falls upon the hall, the more intelligent and experienced ministers have all sensed something isn't quite right. And the ministers who had better eyes, because of the familiarity of such unrivalled beauty, were able to guess the identity of the person in the painting.

The person in the painting is......

.....Gui Wan.....

When the scroll was completely presented before his eyes, Lou Che's one glance immediately recognised the beauty in the painting, his face could not help but show a change, his mind a mess, his temper in a volatile state, and as he looks at the scroll, he shows a clear look of displeasure.

The incessant talking amongst the imperial court does not subside, all officials whispers to one another, first marvelling over the beauty in the painting, secondly, expressing their curiosity towards her identity. A small number of ministers remains silent, amongst the few, were those who happened to have caught a glance of the person in question during the imperial banquet, such person truly is an unforgettable one, but seeing Lou Che's face, no one dares to offer any words.

On the right side, a military commander steps out to speak, he is stood closest to the scroll, and looking at the painting in this very moment, he could not bring himself to look away, in an utterly astonished state, he says: "The Nu really has good eyes, to actually want such a stunning beauty." Having said that, he laughs towards the emissary, highly praising the Nu Prince's great eyes.

Seeing him foolishly continue to remain unaware of the impending doom, the military senior official who stands at the front, lightly calls out: "Do not chatter in court." Only then did the officials gradually quieten down.

In this precise moment of quiet, Prince Duan suddenly sounds a laugh, within the curious eyes of others, he alone says: "Not only the Nu Prince has such great eyes, our Prime Minister Lou's eyes are also astounding."

Hearing the insinuation in his remark, everyone looks to the side, looking at Prime Minister Lou's face, and then turning again to look at Prince Duan's expression, both sides were people who are not to trifled with, the ministers who were knowledgeable and tactful, all chose to not say anything.

Seated above on the dragon throne, the Emperor was also very curious. He sees that the officials were unable to show any response, too bad he is too far from the painting, thus unable to get a clear look at it, at that moment, he beckons, allowing the emissary to bring the painting closer, upon an closer inspection, he was stunned on the spot, blurting out: "Is this Minister Lou's......" Immediately shutting his mouth, he looks towards the first person on the left.

Lou Che smiles like the spring breeze, his face lit with warmth, turning around, he says to the emissary: "May Nu emissary leave the painting scroll behind, our court shall weight out and consider our reply, emissary can rest in the Capital for two days." Having said that, he waves his hand, not giving the person the chance to answer or reject.

The Nu man was somewhat dumbfounded, momentarily not knowing what to say. Seeing the guards come up to take the painting, he hesitates for a long while, and gathers up the painting, saying: "This painting is the Prince's most loved......the Prince has ordered that the painting must not leave me, if Celestial Empire wants to find the person according to the painting, you can have painters make a few copies." Saying that, he places the painting back into the box with great care.

Prince Duan could not hold back his laugh, appearing as though he's in particularly high spirits, "Your Prince truly is an attentive one." Saying that, he glances at Lou Che.

The Emperor could also sense the tense atmosphere, on the verge of exploding, he beckons a nearby eunuch, quietly saying: "First send the emissary to get some rest, allow a painter to copy the painting."

Seeing the emissary leave with long strides, the atmosphere within the hall

completely changes, and an unpredictable silence falls.

The Emperor lightly coughs, breaking through everyone's low spirits, seeing everyone turn their attention to him, he too did not know what to say, and could only faintly smile.

The military official on the right does not understand his actions, loudly saying: "Your majesty, we just need to find the person in the painting, we can immediately paste an imperial notice in search for the person." Having battled at the borders for many years, there is finally hope for a peaceful settlement, the excitement was brewing within his heart, and he hated that they were not immediately reaching settlement in order to relieve urgency of the border wars.

Hearing such words, all the knowing people shows a change in expression, even the Emperor was unable to respond. Only Prince Duan appeared playful, saying: "Ho-ho, that'll depend on Prime Minister Lou's intentions. The person in the painting, doesn't Prime Minister Lou just happen to be familiar with?"

The entire court fell into deeper silence, a portion of the officials who have never seen Gui Wan before were stirred up, one after the other looking towards Lou Che. Lou Che calmly smiles, his tone is as usual: "There are things in the world that are similar in appearance, people have look-a-likes, does the painting have to be of a real person? Just finding someone who looks seven points similar to the painting will do."

"As far as I know, this painting coincidently looks exactly like the real person." Prince Duan persistently refuses to comply.

No one makes a sound within the court, only military commander on the right was completely shocked, dumbly asking: "Who is it?"

Prince Duan turns around, facing Lou Che, seeming to unintentionally mention: "Other than the enchanting beauty of Prime Minister Lou's household, what other family could possibly have a woman of such grace?"

His words triggers something, completely tearing through layers of paper, within the great hall, no one dares to speak again, all officials looks towards one another. Especially the military commander who could not hold back his words just now, his face looking particularly pale, thinking back to the words he had spoke of before, he was immediately dripping in cold sweat.

Face showing no change, Lou Che continues to speak in that voice that brings comfort and warmth to others: "Can I Lou Che not even recognise his own wife now? Needing Prince Duan to remind me."

Every single person in the hall knew that Lou Che has really been angered, this young prime minister is famed for the hidden blades within his smiles, his face is like the spring breeze, yet between his smile, he sentences his enemies to death. Within this huge hall, there is also only a small number of ministers who dares to speak frankly in front of him, as for those who dares to rebuke him, perhaps there is only Prince Duan.

Prince Duan coldly laughs, and no longer speaks again, he turns to face the imperial throne, Lou Che's eyes sweeps across the entire area, laughingly saying: "Those who have seen I, Lou Che's wife, feel free to tell me, is the person in the painting my wife?"

An air of breath-taking force flows out, filling the entire hall. One after the other, the officials lowers their heads, avoiding the spearhead, no one dared to directly speak up. Lin Rui En frowns, deeply thinking for a moment, in the end he still keeps his lips sealed, saying nothing.

All of sudden, a soft voice sounds: "The person in the painting just happens to look a bit like Madam Lou, there was just some mix up just now." Noticing Lou Che look over, he hurriedly speaks again, "From henceforth no one will make the same mistake again."

"How could Madam Lou's painting fall into the hands of barbarians?"

"Exactly."

"I have seen Madam Lou before, she looks utterly different from the person in the painting."

Hearing such comments, Lou Che smiles, without commenting, he turns to face the Emperor.

The Emperor upon seeing such a scene, was completely startled, his expression looks complicated as he calmly asks: "Ministers, how do you think this matter should be dealt with?"

Yet another tricky question has been thrown out, having gone through the

incident just now, who would dare to step up right now? Silence falls, the extreme silence in the imperial court creates an awkward atmosphere.

In this inexplicably strange atmosphere, a crimson red figure steps out from the very back on the right side, bowing his upper body, his clear voice carries a kind of clear texture, invigorating people's spirits: "Your majesty, allow this subject to take care of this matter."

A very slim and handsome figure, with crystal clear temperament, the new First Ranked Scholar is like a breath of fresh air within the imperial court, seeing him step out, the officials let out a sigh of relief, considering he is Prime Minister Lou's star pupil, there should not be much of a problem.

Lou Che turns his head, seeing the last in line on the right, Guan Xiu Wen, a look of surprise flashes by his eyes, upon looking at this youngster again, there is suddenly a strange feeling, he seems to have never seen through this youth, never noticed that he also carries the air of hidden danger within him.

The Emperor gives him a commending nod, looking at this young talent, he too was extremely satisfied. His head turns to the left, asking for Lou Che's opinion.

Lou Che silently nods, and half the people in the court sighs in relief. The Emperor immediately orders Guan Xiu Wen to take care of this matter, thinking about it, this matter only need to finds someone who looks six or seven points similar to the painting, to send off, and so the matter can be considered to have been perfectly solved.

The court assembly today seems to have been particularly long, but one can at least consider themselves to have safely survived it. Once the Emperor has turned in, the officials also disperses, Lou Che was just about to start heading out, when a voice sounded from behind: "That beauty in the painting sure is extraordinary, with peerless elegance, no wonder the Nu would come all the way to the Capital in search for someone."

Steps halting, Lou Che stops, turning his head around, and silently looks at Prince Duan, no emotions were shown within his deep orbs.

Prince Duan coldly laughs saying: "Could it be, Prime Minister Lou doesn't think that the person in the painting is extraordinary? Worthy of being compared to Madam Lou."

Within the large hall, there were still some officials who had not yet left, all who had their eyes on them. Lou Che and Prince Duan have never gotten along, the two people always holding a stance of one mountain cannot have two tigers, and this time, Prince Duan's provocation is considered excusable.

Lou Che smiles indifferently, saying nothing, he coldly looks at Prince Duan, before turning to leave. The officials all stood finding the situation uncomprehensible, secretly harbouring disappointment, they had original thought that the dragon and the tiger will battle it out^[3] right here.

Only Prince Duan stands in his original spot, his spirits gloomy, emotions unstable, as he watches Lou Che's leaving figure, a sense of unease rises within him, he has truly sensed Lou Che's threatening force. That flawlessly warm smile like that of the spring breeze, has caused him to burst with hair-raising terror, there was also that parting glance that held no hidden meaning in it......

- [1] The words **ever so capable**, could have also been translated to **still has it in him**, the phrase used here was actually **bǎo dāo wèi lǎo /** 宝刀未老 , it's meaning, more accurately refers to someone (typically an elder or senior or some sort) who is still as capable as they were when they were young **talent and capability has not deteriorated with age**.
- [2] The Emperor's **throne** is referred to as **lóng yǐ /** 龙椅 which translates to **the chair or the seat of the dragon** as you all know, the Emperor is often represented as a dragon, the ruler of the skies.
- [3] The dragon and tiger battling it out or long zhēng hǔ dòu / 龙争虎斗 is a phrase used to refer to a fierce struggle between two evenly matched opponents.

I know some of you guys mentioned him in the comments of the last chapter but guess who's slowly slipping back into the story again

Part 1



CHAPTER TEN

A Fright At The Dead Of Night (Part One)

The spring days are lengthening out, the plants and trees grow full of verdure. The oriole's cry comes jie-jie, [our wives] go in crowds to gather the white southernwood.^[1]

"Spring days may be lengthening, but the days are still passing by," Gui Wan mumbles seemingly smiling, lightly turning her head, she sees the person approaching and asks: "[Older] Brother, what brings you here?"

The approaching person has a very ordinary face, together with his decent looks, virtually no one would have thought that the two people sat opposite one another were actually biological siblings. Yu Yan He laughs, his ordinary face looking upright and honest, "Before setting off on a long journey, I wanted to come see you."

Gui Wan laughs, revealing not the slightest bit of surprise, under her eyes was fleeting trace of loneliness as she leisurely asks: "Must you really have to leave?"

Hearing her words hold such sorrow that cannot be hidden, Yu Yan He receives a slight shock, he firmly nods his head twice, expressing his own resolution, before turning to once again call out: "Gui Wan....." Turns out, the following

words, he could not even bring himself to say, sorrow washes over him, such emotion on his guileless face, appears particularly heartfelt. To leave Gui Wan all alone in this Capital City, he has too much to apologise for, yet the words are unable to leave his mouth.

"I understand," Interrupting him from further speaking, Gui Wan's lips hooks up into a sweet smile, saying: "What I don't understand is, why did Brother choose Jin Yang City?" That is clearly the Empress' hometown.....she does not want to tread into the deeper meanings behind this, because she has a hunch that amongst them, there is a reason that will make her heart tremble.

".....The Empress is in a very difficult situation right now, Gui Wan." A simple sentence, yet it felt like thunder in spring, loudly striking the ground.

Knitting her brows together, Gui Wan faintly says: "That has nothing to do with Brother." Her heart rejects this conversation topic, a sort of long absent feeling of unwillingness once again rises within her.

"How could it not, Gui Wan, you clearly know how problematic the current situation is." Just thinking of his un-fateful older sister's days in the palace, his guilt would spread out boundlessly, mother's face once again appearing before him, the mother who has never once given him an ounce of love, the gentle words said before her death, he shall never dare to forget.

Gui Wan tightly presses her lips together, not saying a single word, when thinking back to the conversation with Lou Che in the tent, her heart will suddenly feel sour, she does not want to become enemies with him, in terms politics, how scary of an enemy he is; in terms of feelings, to become enemies with him, how difficult and painful it will be for her......suddenly thinking of something, she asks in surprise: "How did Brother know of the Empress' identity?"

"When mother passed away, I already knew." Yu Yan He face appears miserable again.

"Brother," Gui Wan's chest rises and falls along with her voice, attentively looking at that unpretentious face, she reminds: "The world is a man's world, the back palace is a woman's back palace. This is not a problem you can intervene with."

"Traditionally, the back palace and imperial court are closely linked together, right now, Consort Ying's arrogance has already grown too insufferably powerful, just how long can the Empress' seat be protected, one year, two years.....or is it ten years?"

Gui Wan says nothing, absentmindedly looking at the person in front, her heart feeling heavy. After a long moment of silence, she is still indecisive, exactly how is she to choose? No matter what choice is made, they all seem to be wrong, every choice will later be regretted, to weaken Consort Ying's power, is easier said than done, what about Lou Che? Questions forms in her mind, one after the other, the building pressure causing her to start panicking.

Noticing her hesitation, Yu Yan He takes out a small piece of paper from his sleeve, spreading it before Gui Wan's eyes. Gui Wan accepts it, having glanced over the words on the paper, she freezes, such exceptionally graceful handwriting, is clearly from the hand of the Empress, the words were dark red, a letter written in blood, on the little piece of paper, it says: protect the land, protect my royal child, protect the elder statesman. Each stroke hooks onto the heart, each word works up one's emotions, from these quivering strokes, the Empress's heart pain pours out.

From her mind, the image involuntarily emerges before her, the Empress' wretched smile, the scene of her kneeling before her, the mournfulness when she was crying as she requests for her to protect her son and father, the resolution in her smile as she spoke of protecting the land. Thinking and thinking, even her heart was turning sour at the thoughts, Gui Wan could only bitterly smile, right now, how could she give up on the weeping older sister deep within the palace?

"Before Hu Guo Temple, this is what the Empress sent out from the palace, it's been left with me for a month now, a few days ago, I finally received another written message from the palace with great difficulty, after you've read it, decide for yourself." During Gui Wan's moment of contemplation, Yu Yan He takes out another identical piece of paper, passing it over.

Actually feeling afraid to accept this, this little piece of paper, with such immensely heavy air around it, Gui Wan thinks for a long time, and in the end, she still extends her hand to take hold of it. Upon opening it up, she sees a half a

poem: The spring breeze naturally resents the relentless water, it blows east and the water continuously flows west.^[2]

Placing the two pieces of paper together, Gui Wan found it difficult to speak in this moment, crumpling the papers into one, she raises her head and faces Yu Yan He, "Brother, have you already made up your mind?"

Without answering her question, Yu Yan He only looks at her steadily, his eyes filled with gentleness.

.....

The time between them seems to have been silent for a long, long time, so long that Gui Wan had almost forgotten where she is, matters that occurred over the past half of the year and more, revisits her mind, scene by scene, she is searching for answers. Having returned from Feng Qi Slope, this past month, she had spent recuperating her body, avoiding all the worldly controversies, knowing that the Empress' title has been protected, she was greatly relieved, at the same time, she found a few contemporarily prestigious strategists and educationists, in efforts to learn the art of trickeries, could it be that, this is also her subconsciously preparing for the future?

No matter how she thinks about it, there is no results, Gui Wan sighs in resignation, noticing that her brother is waiting for her answer, she spreads out a smile on her face: since there is no answer, then from now on, she can slowly search for it, perhaps, she will find a perfect solution that's best for both sides.

Seeing a hidden meaning within her smile, Yu Yan He knows she found an answer, and also relaxes. Watching as Gui Wan walks up to the study desk, taking a brush, grinding the ink, he was rather puzzled, walking up to her, he continues to watch as Gui Wan takes out a piece of paper, writing something on it. He was about to join her, when the paper was already handed to him, Gui Wan's voice was filled with cheeriness as she says: "Before Brother leaves, think of a way to pass this to the Empress."

Yu Yan He speechlessly accepts the piece of paper, his steady eyes glances over the two short phrases:

Fragrant flower and plants have already passed by so why is it necessary to

hate, summer activities in the shade is [also] pleasant. [3]

Having sent off her older brother, Gui Wan quietly sits inside the study room alone, within this quiet environment, she feels a sense of loneliness and solitude that she has never experienced before. Because of the conversation with her older brother before, questions that she had originally been avoiding can no longer be avoided, the road ahead is immeasurable, and she cannot clearly see what the future holds anymore.

In her moment of deep thoughts, a burst of knocks sounds outside the door. She gets on her feet, opens the door, and was just about to question, when she sees Lou Che standing outside, within his elegant smile, there holds a hidden meaning that one cannot grasp onto. A group of guards stands behind him, there were also two efficient and clever looking maids.

Slightly surprised, she asks him: "Lord Husband, what happened?"

Lou Che watches as Gui Wan walks out from the study room, he lightly frowns, and throws a signal at the guards behind him, seeing the guards spread out, he walks up to the door frame, blocking Gui Wan's line of sight as he beckons a maid to pass over a cloak, gently wrapping it around Gui Wan's body, with a voice as gentle as water, he says: "You've only just recovered......didn't I say to take care of yourself?"

Seeing Gui Wan step out from the house, her beautiful face lit pink with powder, leading people into a trance, he could not help but to lower his head and lightly kiss her cheek, when he had just came in contact with her smooth, delicate face, a faint fragrance drifts out, it was as though he got bewitched as his kisses, densely, gently, lands on the side of Gui Wan's face, on her neck.

A limp, numbing feeling spreads through her entire body, Gui Wan turns her head in avoidance. Even since returning from Feng Qi Slope, Lou Che has been acting more affectionate with such intimate acts, causing her to not know what to do, her heart feels a little nervous, from the corner of her eyes, she notices the two maids are still behind, and immediately feels ashamed and embarrassed.

Lou Che lightly releases Gui Wan, noticing where she is looking, he faintly

laughs as he says: "Here are the maids I have picked out for you, they will be taking care of your diet and daily life from now on."

Gui Wan frowns, instantly feeling uncertain. Her personal maid has always been Ling Long alone, the estate is also swarming with servants, to suddenly receive an addition of two personal maids gives her a strange feeling, she vaguely feels like something has happened, at a turn of an eye, she sees that the guards from just now, have already spread into every corner, the security of this courtyard has clearly been strengthened. This only makes her feel even more doubtful.

The two maids walks up front, kneeling before Gui Wan as they say: "I am Ru Qing (Ru Ming), greeting Madam." The two people are not only synchronised in action, synchronised in speech, even the tone of their voices are exactly the same, Gui Wan was also secretly amazed, unaware that there are such highly trained maids in the estate.

Seeing the Gui Wan does not seem to be rejecting this arrangement, Lou Che's heart was half relieved. As soon as he left the imperial court assembly, he immediately made a series of preparations, he must thoroughly protect the woman before him, she just seem to always manage to easily tread into his heart, affecting his mood, plus the situation seems to have become increasingly serious. He lets out a little laugh, secretly thinking: could it be that pampering can also become addictive?

Ordering for the two maids to rise, hundreds of thoughts goes through Gui Wan's head, thinking of the written message from the Empress just now, thinking of Lou Che safeguarding Consort Ying in court, all of a sudden, her feelings were in a complicated mess.

Lou Che pulls Gui Wan along to the dining room for dinner, along the way, Gui Wan found that, there are indeed much more guards than usual, fortifying this Prime Minister Estate, this brings greater certainty to her original thoughts, so something really did happen. Plus, seeing Lou Che's behaviour, could this matter be related to her, but thinking of it like this, she too cannot imagine what this could be about, lightly shaking her head, she laughs at herself for thinking too much, it is not the time to dwell on this matter right now, what she needs to think about now is, how she could stealthily bypass Lou Che's eyes, and help the

Empress securely anchor her status.....

Up till it was time to sleep, she was still thinking about this problem. Between this time, the two maids were indeed clever and well behaved, quick to complete all tasks, not at all any less than Ling Long, it's just that, they do not like to speak nor laugh, just like people made of wood, something Gui Wan feels a little unaccustomed to.

Lying down, her thoughts were like tidal waves, repeatedly thinking over the problem, trying to find the roots of trouble, also thinking of a solution that will be best for the two opposing sides in future, to be able to aid the Empress, but also not cause any harm to Consort Ying. Thinking for a long time, it was still a huge mess, sigh, could it be that worldly affairs are all so brutal, with essentially no way to satisfy both sides?

Right in this moment when her mind was in chaos, a subtle aroma faintly drifts in, entering her nose, her body thus starts feeling light, her thoughts gradually sinking, such comfort makes one sigh in satisfaction. A vague thought flashes by her mind, getting the feeling that there is something not right with this aroma, without waiting for her reaction, the darkness has completely enveloped her......

.....

In her hazy dream, there seems to be someone hovering over her bed, who is it?

This isn't right, it's not a dream, Gui Wan abruptly opens her eyes, she sits up, and catches a black shadow flashing past, receiving a fright, Gui Wan lightly cries out, without waiting for her to completely react, the black shadow leaps outside. Seeing him leave within a flash, Gui Wan has just let out a sigh of relief, when she hears a wave of fighting sounds from outside, knowing that the man in black has ran into the guards, Gui Wan gets out of bed, her steps reaches the door, and she wanders out, a burst of cold wind meets her, and only then did she realise she was dripping in cold sweat.

She looks up towards the courtyard, to find that the man in black is fighting two people, those two people were actually the maids Ru Qing and Ru Ming, the man in black is no doubt highly skilled in martial arts, but the two maids were not any less than him, every strike ruthless and piercing, not at all sloppy^[4]. The

sound of the three people fighting spreads out, and not long after, a load more guards sprung out like bamboo shoots after the spring rain, gathering around the man in black, Gui Wan coldly watches on from the side, the more she thinks about it, the stranger it seems to be, she does not understand martial arts, so why does she feel that the man in blacks' actions seems vaguely familiar......as though she has seen it somewhere before.

In this dark night, three figures endlessly fights on in the Prime Minister Estate, a gathering of guards surrounding the three of them, Gui Wan attentively watches this war-like situation, even if she does not understand martial arts in the slightest bit, she too can see that Ru Qing, Ru Ming, the two people act in harmony, with perfect teamwork, didn't think that Lou Che had actually given her two maids of such formidable power.....once again looking back at the man in black, her doubts deepens, from looking at his actions, this mysterious person does not want to cause her any harm, if so, then what is his objective?

Endless thoughts tumbles as she absentmindedly stands by the room door, when she was suddenly overcome with warmth, an additional outer wear hangs over her body, she turns her head, meeting Lou Che's worried eyes, a gentle and warm voice coming out: "Let's go in, careful you don't catch a cold." So he too has come after hearing the fight. In face of Lou Che's hinting, she stands in her original spot without moving.

Lou Che helps Gui Wan drape on an outer wear, and tidy up her slightly dishevelled hair, upon lightly taking hold of her hand, he feels it was somewhat icy cold, and anger flares up deep down in his heart, abruptly taking half a step forward, he covers the majority of Gui Wan's line of sight, lightly raising his hand to make a simple action, the guards acted with amazingly swift pace, spreading out into a fan shape, they raise their bow and arrows on standby, consistently aligning their aim at the man in black.

Seeing such a fuss, Gui Wan was also able to guess, not long later, the man in black can only become a hedgehog, silently letting out a sigh, she turns back to her room. It was at this moment of turning, that an unexpected movement from the man in black, caught her attention, the man in black forces Ru Qing two steps back, suddenly reaching into his chest and dug out an inch long accessory, in the dark, a faint silver light flashes by, Gui Wan freezes, this thing, there is no

way she could forget, it is the Nu's insect venom.....

The man in black raises the short flute and blows into it, no sound was emitted, the two maids and all the guards fell into incessant surprise. Her memories resurges, Gui Wan lets out a small cry in shock: "Not good."

Hearing her blurt out those words, Lou Che frowns, ordering the guards: "Everyone disperse." Once the gathering of guards heard this, they took several steps back, and the circle they formed suddenly expanded by a lot. Right when everyone were in a state of puzzlement, a sudden "weng" sound approaches, heading straight to the middle of the courtyard, within the darkness, everyone pulls themselves together to take a look, it's actually a bunch of unidentifiable worms.

No one would have thought that they would actually come across something like this, everyone was thrown into chaos, in this chaotic moment, Lou Che coldly calls out: "Light the fire." Hearing the order, even the usually well trained guards, could not immediately calm down, not long after, the courtyard was lit up with a fire as bright as day. Insects are generally afraid of firelight, right now with the courtyard lit ablaze, the worms disappears without a trace, even the man in black fled in disarray.

Ru Qing, Ru Ming and all the guards kneels down in unison, not daring to make a move, Lou Che's face is as usual, his feelings concealed, warmly smiling, he says: "All right now, you're all pardoned." Hearing him say this, everyone lets out a sigh of relief, immediately leaving the courtyard, istantly, the courtyard sinks back into darkness.

Lou Che turns around, and sees the side of Gui Wan's beautiful face hidden in the shadows, he gently consoles her saying: "Do not worry, I will take care of it."

Faintly hooking up the corner of her lips in a smile, Gui Wan says nothing, her eyes falls upon the middle of the courtyard, only feeling that within this scene of absence and darkness, it seems as though even her heart has sunken into such immeasurable space.

Standing in his original spot next to her, Lou Che's face shows no emotions, his thoughts like tidal waves, thinking of what happened in the morning, and then to actually have Nu's people breaking into the Prime Minister Estate at night, could

it be that there's someone leaking out secrets within the imperial court?

After what happened tonight, Gui Wan could not sleep.

- [1] The opening lines of this chapter actually comes from the final verse of the poem Chū chē / 出车 which means Driving out the car/cart/carriage. The poem itself is recorded in the Chinese classic, Shī Jīng / 诗经 or Book of Poetry / Book of Odes in the Xiǎo yǎ / 小雅 or Minor Odes of the Kingdom section. I also like to declare DISCLAIMER for the translation, I thought it would be better to let you guys read the official english translation by James Legge (and ahem... because of my own laziness), if you want to read the whole poem itself, please click on the following link: http://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/chu-che [Note that these poems are classic texts so it only makes sense that it is written in traditional Chinese characters, although I kept with simplified Chinese in this footnote]
- [2] The spring breeze naturally resents the relentless water, it blows east and the water continuously flows west:

Chūn fēng zì hèn wú qíng shuǐ / 春风自恨无情水

Chuī dé dōng liú jìng rì xī / 吹得东流竟日西

The poem is used to express feelings of pain in the much cherished spring time. The water relentlessly flows as it defies the breeze that blows east, whilst it continues to flow west, **expressing how quick time passes by**, and the spring breeze can do nothing about it.

[3] Fragrant flower and plants have already passed by so why is it necessary to hate, summer activities in the shade is [also] pleasant:

Fāng fēi guò jǐn hé xū hèn / 芳菲过尽何须恨

Xià mù yīn yīn zhèng kě rén / 夏目荫荫正可人

Honestly, I'm not actually too sure if this translation is accurate, poems can be so difficult to translate haha. But it should still be somewhat accurate because this is a response to the previous poem, and Gui Wan is optimistically cheering up the Empress by saying – since the fragrant spring has already passed, what's the point in hating, isn't the lush green shades of summer just as pleasant? –

which is basically her way of saying cherish the present and let go of the past

[4] The Chinese phrase used to describe **sloppiness** – in action of course – is **tuō ní dài shuǐ /** 拖泥带水 translates to **dragging [things] through mud and water** and thus causing a mess in the process.

At first I thought that Gui Wan's family did not seem all that nice, with each parent liking one particular child and disliking/neglecting the other, but at least the children of the family or are all great individuals. Gui Wan's older brother Yu Yan He is just so nice, too nice, despite the love that Gui Wan got from their mother as compared to the neglect he got, he still genuinely cares for Gui Wan as well as their dead mother's dying wish. It's just so heartwarming to see that scene and the interaction between them, and to see the unspoken care and love they share.

Honestly I don't think we are ever told for sure that the Empress knows of her relationship with Gui Wan but it is hinted that she knows. I wish they could gave us more details and develop this "bond" between them, as there are still confusing points concerning the connection of relationship between Gui Wan's mother and the Empress' family.

Lou Che is set on protecting Gui Wan right now, he knows that Gui Wan must have met the Nu Prince at some point in time, and probably has his own suspicions, but even at this point, he still does not question her, and is just set keeping for safe and sound.

Part 2



CHAPTER TEN

A Fright At The Dead Of Night (Part Two)

In the early hours of the second morning, a lightweight and plain horse carriage stops in front of the Prime Minister Estate back doors. The servants assigned to watch over the back garden were filled with incessant curiosity, and were just about to step forward, when a young man suddenly jumps out from the carriage, handsome and elegant, such appearance of great brilliance, although his clothing were ordinary, but it could not conceal his elegant bearing that is as refreshingly clear as water.

The servants upon seeing this year's First Ranked Scholar, were immediately put in a difficult spot, a month ago, Master with the reasoning of the imperial examination, moved Guan Xiu Wen to an outer courtyard, after he became the First Ranked Scholar, another order was placed, to disallow entrance to the inner court without any notice, now that Master isn't in the estate, how are they to take care of this matter? Thinking of this Lord First Ranked Scholar's friendly and warm nature, Master's precautions against him is just too unjustifiable.

Right in between this moment of dilemma, the housekeeper comes out, and upon seeing Guan Xiu Wen, he receives a slight shock, laughing in a "hehe" sound as he approaches. Standing before him, he gives a little bow as he says:

"This old servant has yet to congratulate Gentleman Guan, how disrespectful of me....." His voice absolutely heartfelt, sincere and moving.

"How is that so?" Guan Xiu Wen hurries forward, his face carrying a friendly smile, such smile is thoroughly pure like that of water, "I have not yet thanked you for taking care of me before."

The two of them exchanged pleasantries for a long time, both with feelings of reluctance, seeming as though they lack the intentions, Guan Xiu Wen mentions: "I'd like to enter the inner courtyard to thank Madam for her grace of rebirth, don't know if you can do me a favour?"

The housekeeper also reveals a look of difficulty, remembering Lord Prime Minister's former orders, he does not dare to personally let someone in, turning to observe Guan Xiu Wen, an appearance of innocence, crystal clear purity and elegance, he could not help but to secretly let out a sigh, such a friendly youth, just what kind of harm can he cause? And then remembers that he was originally brought into the residence by Madam, to want to go thank her right now, can also only be considered as human nature to do so, his heart slightly relaxes as he quietly says: "Gentleman Guan go on in, be careful not to let others see, Madam is resting in the study room of the back chambers."

Smiling as he nods his head in thanks, Guan Xiu Wen passes by several people, and heads towards the back courtyard.

Originally knowing the Prime Minister Estate like the back of his palm, he chooses to take a quiet and secluded path and actually managed to not run into any servants, in a blink of an eye, he had already arrived at the entrance to the back chambers' study room, from across the flower beds, he sees two maids step out from the study room, very carefully closing the doors, before turning to leave. He receives a slight shock, those two maids, he does not seem to have any recollection of.

Seeing that they have far left, Guan Xiu Wen goes up the steps, extending his hands to push open the doors, his face lit with a cheerful smile, he was just about to call out, but with the doors half opened, he looks into the study room, to find that no voice is ringing out.

The study room in this back courtyard is quiet and refined, on the settee made

of rosewood, Gui Wan lies in deep sleep, in such indescribable peace, the isolation makes it seem as though this place has become an entirely different dimension.

As quietly as possible, he slowly approaches the settee, leaning over to attentively gaze at Gui Wan's sleeping beauty. The normally gazing eyes were closed right now, like a water lily, her commonly seen smile when awake is concealed, making her appear increasingly pretty and tranquil, watching, and watching, a burst of clamouring gives rise in his heart, his hand reaches out to the face that has countlessly appeared in his dreams, a wonderful feeling hits his fingers, and as though he got possessed, his breathing pattern shortens, difficult to calm down, his heart anxiously beats as he lowers his body, bringing his face just an inch away from Gui Wan, he could clearly feel Gui Wan's soft breathing, making his heart beat even faster, unable to restrain himself, he lowers his head, lightly kissing her hair, her eyes, her nose. Shocked upon realiseing what he is doing, he immediately raises his head, and in that moment, he seems to be able to hear the sound of his own blood flow.

The person on the settee does not wake up, sunken into deep sleep, between her eyebrows, the trace of fatigue is shown. Wanting to help her wipe away this trace of troubles, his hand reaches for her face, but without even touching her, it falters, and comes towards her slightly parted lips, these lips that are three points more charming than peach blossoms, finding it difficult to control himself, he places a kiss on them, not daring to disturb the person in deep sleep, he just about touches the surface, lightly kissing down on Gui Wan's lips, as though he's making a vow......

This could perhaps be the only vow he has made in this lifetime.....

Quietly sitting at the side of the settee, he had long forgotten the time, no matter what his eyes just cannot avert themselves away from this face that he always dreamt of and longed for, originally he had only wanted to come ask about the matter concerning yesterday's night raid, originally he had only wanted to come and listen to her voice, originally.....he had already long forgotten his original reason for coming here, he is immersed in this place, unable to pull himself away.

The old housekeeper comes up to the entrance of the study room, from the

half opened doors, this is the scene he sees, his heart felt as though it was struck by thunder, shocked to the point his voice could not come out. That youth, quietly sits by Madam's side without moving, his eyes filled with infinite tenderness, such infatuated eyes......cold sweat dripping, the housekeeper shows an extremely severe look, not daring to make a single move, he does not know whether to alert him or......

Right in this uneasy moment of hesitation and panic, the youth suddenly stands up, and looks out, with no time to hide aside, he immediately meets eyes with the youth. How strange of a matter this is, the clear eyes that were full of tenderness just now, to think that the instance it came in contact with the housekeeper's, it actually froze up, shooting out a trace of razor-sharp fierceness, making the housekeeper feel like he had been frozen in ice the moment it hit him.

The youth heads towards the door with light steps, turning his head back in dismay, he looks at the figure on the settee as he gently pushes open the doors, and makes a hushing gesture towards the housekeeper. Stepping outside, he seems to know the housekeeper will follow after him, and so stands in wait in centre of the courtyard, only then does the housekeeper reacts, going up to him with hurried steps, words yet to slip out his mouth.

Guan Xiu Wen suddenly turns around, looking at the housekeeper with a seeming smile, saying: "Housekeeper Lou's granddaughter truly is cute and innocent....."

Not understanding why he would suddenly mention this, the housekeeper looks at the youth in surprise, is this really the Guan Xiu Wen he knew? So ice-cold, so heartless, so eerie.....

Taking a step closer, Guan Xiu Wen whispers into the housekeeper's ear: "Even if not for your own sake, at least take your family into consideration, what you just saw, forget it all." Having said that, he looks at the housekeeper with a smile that holds a deeper meaning, before turning to leave.

The old housekeeper stands alone in the courtyard, the wind grazes past his ear as he faces his inner struggles endlessly. He should tell Lord Prime Minister of this matter, allow Lord Prime Minister to decide upon it, but in the end he does

not take a single step, those words remains vividly in his mind, stopping him from taking action, "Housekeeper Lou's granddaughter truly is cute and innocent....."

What that youth said is true, he cannot not consider this point.

For long, long, time, he is still standing in the middle of the courtyard......

Coming out from the Prime Minister Estate, Guan Xiu Wen carried that meaningful smile all along, unable to conceal his feelings of pleasure, he walks up to the horse carriage, looking back at the Prime Minister Estate, he thinks for a long moment before turning to get on the horse carriage, ordering the long awaiting coachman: "Let's go."

The horse carriage slowly departs from the Prime Minister Estate, the coachman is an honest and simple man over thirty years of age, and would never question his master's matters, his character is particular direct, asking: "Gentleman, returning to the First Ranked Scholar Estate?" The Emperor has bestowed an official's residence, although construction is not been fully completed, he has already moved in.

"No need," A clear and sharp voice comes from the carriage, "To the Nu emissary's residence."

Turning back in surprise, the coachman had originally wanted to say something, but did not say it in the end, Master's matters, do not ask, do not speak, do not say too much, these are the fundamentals of being a servant.

All of a sudden, Guan Xiu Wen asks: "When will the First Ranked Scholar Estate be fully renovated?" His voice flat, unable to pick out the high and low tones.

"Gentleman, there's still another two months." The coachman respectfully replies, and once again opens his mouth, "Gentleman, in the courtyard, what flowers to plant? How about pomegranate, it's almost summer, pomegranate blossoms looks nice, and you can even eat pomegranates fruits....."

"Plant plum blossoms." One cold phrase, cuts him off his lengthy talk.

The coachman says in surprise: "Plum blossom? Winter has already passed by, so bare, what's so nice about it....." Seeing that there is not even the slightest bit of response from within the carriage, he knew that saying anymore would be futile, whatever the gentleman has decided upon, no one can change.

The coachman's nagging words that travels to his ears, Guan Xiu Wen pays no attention to, what flower to plant? Of course plum blossoms.....extending his arm to take hold of a box within the carriage, he quietly opens it, inside lays a scroll, he absentmindedly looks at the scroll, unconsciously revealing a smile.

Thinking for a long time, he closes the box, his smile also fades away along with this action. Thinking of Gui Wan sleeping so snugly in daylight, she must have run into the Nu spy, looks like the Nu people acts very fast, seems like, he has not fruitlessly given them clues to find the person in the painting, something flashes by his eyes, his face turns dark as he mumbles: "There's still a lot of matters to attend to....."

His hand lightly strokes the box, Guan Xiu Wen closes his eyes, his thoughts drifting far away......

Be it Lou Che, be it the Nu Tribe, no one has the power to own this roll of scroll, he tightly grips onto the box, so tight, even his knuckles faintly whitens.....



An emerald green bamboo forest, stalks standing tall like brittle jade, the air carries pure moist and light fragrance, a slight icy cold breath is inhaled into the mouth, such feeling that is refreshing to the heart.

A tall building stands in the middle of the forest, strings of beaded curtain hangs from the eaves, whether it's in terms of style or form, everything differs greatly from the Celestial Empire. A figure is faintly visible behind the beaded curtains, having yet to approach up close, one can already hear a wave of warm and radiant voice. Freezing on the spot, the youth's steps falters, didn't think that he would be here, his figure comes to a standstill as he hesitates as to

whether he should walk in or not.

The person inside suddenly stops speaking, and the curtains hanging from the doors are lifted, a deeply moving voice rings out: "So it is Xiu Wen that came." Such handsomely refined face is brewing with a faint smile bathed in the spring breeze, Lou Che stands above in the building, with an appearance of noble elegance. Only Guan Xiu Wen who is facing him knows, within his smiling eyes there hides traces of hostility and a biting chill.

"Teacher." Holding the box, Guan Xiu Wen was in an inconvenient position to bow down in greeting properly and could only bend his body a little. He did not think that the person would show up at the Nu Emissary's residence, giving him a big shock, taking a deep breath, his state of mind returns to normal, concealing his deepest thoughts, he is still carrying a look that is as pure as water.

Letting out two sounds of a low laugh, he too could not tell what the meaning of this laugh is, half playful half teasing: "Didn't think that the one we're waiting to come, would be you, I had originally thought it would be Prince Duan....."

His heart quivers, tasting a bad meaning behind his words, Guan Xiu Wen humbly smiles, "Student is returning the painting on imperial orders, incidentally paying a visit to the Nu emissary." Making a clear statement of his objectives in coming here, to reduce the opposition's doubts.

Declining to comment, Lou Che turns his body away, letting down the curtains, and turns to head back inside, Guan Xiu Wen could no longer retreat, and could only follow him into the building. From the tables Lou Che and the Nu emissary individually sits at, a warm and clear air floats up, tea fragrance floods into the nose, without a word, he holds onto the box and quietly sits on the next seat from Lou Che.

"I have just started discussing the matter concerning yesterday's night raid with the emissary, since you have come, you might as well tell us your views as well." Not caring whether Guan Xiu Wen has seated himself yet, Lou Che says this in a directly open^[1] manner.

The emissary's face appears slightly unnatural, Guan Xiu Wen quickly glances over at him, then continues to act modest and respectful, looking as though he received a shock, he says in surprise: "Teacher's estate was under attack? Who

would be so bold?"

Hearing this, Lou Che starts laughing, insolence revealed in his gentle elegance, laughter filled with chilliness, in midst of this laughter, the Nu emissary could not help but show a slight change in his face, Guan Xiu Wen faintly smiles but says nothing, just that his clenched fists were already sweating profusely.

"Really worthy of being my pupil....." Laughingly saying this phrase, not knowing whether it is a praise or a derogatory.

The Nu emissary looks into Lou Che's eyes, steadily saying: "Prime Minister Lou coming here today, it's not just to discuss this night raid matter right?"

Somewhat unable to bear the rather eerie atmosphere indoors, he breaks the deadlock.

Abruptly withdrawing his smile, Lou Che returns to his elegantly gentle character, not in a hurry to answer the Nu emissary's question, he raises the tea cup from the table, lightly taking in a mouthful, only when he seemed to be enjoying the aftertaste, does he leisurely answer: "I have come not for the night raid matter, but regarding the meaning behind this matter, I cannot not make a little trip here." Having said that, he sweeps a glimpse of Guan Xiu Wen from his peripheral vision, the light in his eyes chillingly shocking.

Neither the emissary nor Guan Xiu Wen dared to rashly speak up, and could only wait for his following words.

Placing down the tea cup, Lou Che looks at the Nu emissary, "Emissary has come from afar, your sincerity in requesting peace settlement is visible, as a great and impressive country, our Celestial Empire would naturally embrace it....." Seeing the Nu emissary's expression soften, he continues to state, "They say the Nu Tribe suffered a major natural disaster during this year's winter, with countless horse and sheep casualties, crops are also in bad harvest?"

Hearing these words, the Nu emissary's face turns pale, bitterly murmuring in reply: "This is exaggerating, this year's disaster is not severe."

"Emissary's words have cured my doubts, and here I thought the Nu were requesting settlement to receive help and support, so it is indeed because of insufficient fighting force."

Not only is the Nu emissary's face not looking good at all, even Guan Xiu Wen was rather surprised, didn't think that the settlement had such reason behind it also.

The Nu emissary had secretly received a big shock. In fact, the Nu requesting a peace treaty, was indeed because this time's disaster has caused too big of a damage, no matter if it is crops or livestock, all have suffered severe losses, a sudden decrease in warhorses, causing the Nu to be in an difficult situation that makes battle matters in the short term inadvisable, seeking settlement is also a reluctant move in this helpless situation.

After a long silence, the emissary speaks up with fluent Han Chinese as he blurts out: "Our tribe may be suffering from a natural disaster, but it has yet to reach such severity, Prime Minister Lou needs not to worry at all."

Guan Xiu Wen listens on from the side, hundreds of thoughts running through his head, looking at the emissary, looking at Lou Che, hesitating over what move to make.

Lou Che remains resolutely unmoved, indifferently diverting to another topic as he says: "The intruder that appeared in my estate last night, did not have any malicious intentions. It's just that, right at the end when he fled the scene, what he used was actually the Nu's 'insect venom'." Raising his eyes to observe the Nu emissary's expression, he says, "My wife received a scare, sleepless all night....." His words because of the mentioning of Gui Wan, reveals tenderness, his voice turning soft and clear.

The Nu emissary immediately clarifies: "This matter must be an misunderstanding."

"I also believe there is definitely a misunderstanding in this, therefore I do not plan on pursuing the matter." Suddenly standing up, Lou Che wanders to the window, observing the green bamboo scenery outside, "The Nu's private reasons for settlement, I can disregard, the night raid matter, I can also ignore. The Nu coming to friendly terms with our country, is what the people hopes for....."

Hearing him say such words, the Nu emissary could not help but to sigh in relief, listening to Lou Che's intentions, there seems to be a condition, he pays him full attention, attentively listening for any hidden meanings.

Turning to look at the two people inside, Lou Che laughingly says: "Nu Emissary has given our country three great gifts, our Celestial Empire shall also be gifting great treasures in exchange, the Nu Prince likes beauties of the Celestial Empire, our Celestial Empire shall select five great beauties from all over the country, to gift the Nu Tribe. As for that painting, I believe the Nu Prince had just made it on a whim."

The Nu emissary freezes on the spot, raising his eyes to Lou Che, his thoughts powering forward as he says: "Prime Minister Lou's meaning is....."

"Xiu Wen," The sudden call out causes Guan Xiu Wen to secretly receive a shock, only seeing Lou Che approach him, "Give me the painting."

The tightly held box in his hands, not knowing whether to give it or not, he steadies his feelings, and in the end, he could only pass it over, in a moment of helplessness.

Lou Che reaches out to accept the scroll container, immediately opening it, and takes out the painting scroll, the scroll slowly unrolls, Guan Xiu Wen and the Nu emissary both turn their heads to watch as the entire painting is presented before them. Lou Che also sighs in praise, this painting is so lifelike, impressively vivid, as if Gui Wan had descended into the painting itself. He could not help but to secretly suspect, has the Nu Prince personally seen Gui Wan before?

Seeing the painting scroll, Guan Xiu Wen's face appears complicated, pain of secret anguish flowing out from his eyes, he reaches out to the newly brewed tea on the table, and with one careless move, he pours out too much, the hot tea pouring onto his hand, yet he was unconscious of all this.

Observing the painting for a long time, Lou Che's eyes does not look away as he says: "The person in the painting is my wife."

The two people, having heard this, were not at all surprised, one had long known this fact, one had spied on the Prime Minister Estate, verifying the identity of the person in the painting, but to hear Lou Che personally say this at this precise moment, they still received a slight shock, to know that in the imperial court, Lou Che had once denied this, only to suddenly admit it right now, there must be a reason for this.

"From now on, I hope that there would no longer be anyone who uses a

portrait painting of my wife in search for someone, this portrait painting that was created on a whim, burn it." Walking up to the windowsill in slow steps, he takes out a lighter, and lights a corner. The flames rises, engulfing the scroll of painting, and in a blink of an eye, the painting had reduced to ashes.

All three of them kept their eyes wide opened as they watched the painting disappear within the fire, the Nu emissary also held a sense of regret, the Prince had told him to search for the beauty in the painting, but it looks like he can only return in failure, towards this gentle and elegant Prime Minister Lou, he always seems to get a deep feeling of being unable to do anything.

Turning his head to look at the varied expression of the two people, Lou Che speaks with an elegant smile: "This painting no longer exists from henceforth, nor would there be people who speaks of this, the Nu can also come to friendly terms with the Celestial Empire, it sure is a wonderful situation of one move three gains, is it not?"

On this day, the Nu emissary announces his leave towards the Emperor, his mouth shut off from mentioning the matter of the painting, carrying gifts of treasurable items and five beauties of the Celestial Empire, he leaves the Capital City in return to the Nu.

The Emperor's was like an elated dragon, feeling as though troubled matters were easily solved, the imperial court was also filled with delighted faces wherever you look, everyone was beaming in great joy.

"Lord First Ranked Scholar please wait......" Hearing someone call out, Guan Xiu Wen looks startled at the person, his expression appearing to show alertness, never would he have thought that the one he had called him would actually be Prince Duan, although he cannot make out what the opposition wants, he still had no choice but to stop and wait.

Prince Duan hurries over, walking side by side with Guan Xiu Wen as they head out of the assembly hall, pleasantly remarking: "Lord First Ranked Scholar is young and promising, with distinguished and commendable bearings, earning my incessant admiration ah."

Even his words are flattering, Guan Xiu Wen was secretly wary deep inside, not

knowing what Prince Duan is trying to achieve.

Seeing the hidden wariness in Guan Xiu Wen's eyes, Prince Duan lowly laughs, lowering his voice as he says: "Looks like Lord First Ranked Scholar holds deep thoughts about my preconception ah, I am but speaking in accordance to my appreciating heart."

"I thank your highness' appreciation....." Appearance wise he does not reveal any emotions, continuing to hang on a modest smile.

"Unfortunate ah....." A sound of a sigh, attracting Guan Xiu Wen's attention, he changes to a regretful tone, "Prime Minister Lou does not seem to be able to accept you ah."

Smile appearing denser, Guan Xiu Wen appears relaxed and carefree, "Prince Duan must be joking, Teacher has given me the grace of rebirth, such grace is no different to that of parents, how could he harbour envy."

Seeing his smoothly clear smile, Prince Duan also could not help but to think of him as praiseworthy, at such a young age, he has already learnt to hide his feelings, Prince Duan felt that, in a few years' time, he too would definitely become a powerful minister. Unfortunately, he is still puerile and tender right now. Prince Duan seriously says: "It is I who spoke out of line, Lord First Ranked Scholar please don't let it bother you."

The two people shares a laugh, filled with superficiality, their eyes quickly meets the parked horse carriages outside the palace, when Prince Duan unintentionally mentions: "Come to think of it, today sure was strange, that Nu emissary had actually not mentioned anything and just left like that, isn't Lord First Ranked Scholar curious?"

"I have no intentions to be curious....."

"Lord First Ranked Scholar truly is humble," Prince Duan laughs, "It is only right if you shall come to understand the whole story in this."

With not even the slightest consideration of giving in, Guan Xiu Wen displays a look of innocence, "I truly do not quite understand what your highness means."

Prince Duan also did not get annoyed, filled with hidden implications, he lightly says: "The painting the Nu emissary brought in, I believe Lord First Ranked

Scholar must know better than me, exactly who the person in the painting is."

Seeing the other person show no response at all, Prince Duan immediately says: "We honest men do not speak shady words, I have a humble gift for Lord First Ranked Scholar, if you would please take a look." Having said that, from his sleeves, he pulls out a painting scroll, and it was in this precise moment of pulling it out, that he clearly sees Guan Xiu Wen's eyes flash a look of difficulty.

His hands were slightly trembling, Guan Xiu Wen practically dared not to take hold of this painting, his heart rapidly beating, getting the feeling as though someone has seen through him. Prince Duan smiles as he tucks the painting into his hand, watching him slowly unroll the painting.

He did not think this painting that had burned away would appear before him again, Guan Xiu Wen had almost practically forgot to breath, blankly staring at the painting, his heart hit by an overwhelming force.^[2]

Taking in the entire view of his reaction, Prince Duan makes not a single move. Indeed, ah, that day in court assembly, with a momentary glance upon seeing this painting, this young First Ranked Scholar's overflowing show of love, just happened to have been caught on by him, although he had concealed this extremely well, he still could not escape intentional observation, Prince Duan leisurely says: "When the imperial palace's painter was copying the painting, I told him to produce an extra one, there is no one else who has discovered this, Lord First Ranked Scholar can rest assured."

Guan Xiu Wen completely gathers up his emotions, his eyes turns cold, and his face expressionless as he asks: "Prince Duan, what is the meaning of doing this?"

Reaching out to pat his shoulder, signalling him to relax, Prince Duan carries an intention to please as he says: "Lord First Ranked Scholar, no need to worry, I have no other meaning behind this, just that you seem to really like this painting, so I have gifted it to you."

Coldly not responding, he knows that it will not be easy to find out his intentions, so he quietly waits for him to speak on.

"The painting certainly is good, but no matter what, it cannot be better than the real person right?" He teasingly says, his steps not faltering, "I heard that Madam Lou's older brother is transferring to a post in Jin Yang, Madam Lou wants to send him far up to Chen Zhou; the Nu emissary's returning path to the Nu, just happens to be a similar route to Madam Lou." His ending sentence suddenly seems to be unintentionally mentioning two matters irrelevant to one another.

Guan Xiu Wen was stunned, his rounded eyes fiercely shooting arrows towards Prince Duan, biting his lips as he remains silent.

Prince Duan did not mind, continuing to say: "Don't know if Lord First Ranked Scholar likes my gift?" Suddenly stopping in his steps, forcing Guan Xiu Wen to also have no choice but to stop, "What I want and what Lord First Ranked Scholar wants, although not the same, the method is precisely unified, don't know whether First Ranked Scholar is willing to collaborate with me or not?"

Hearing the voice cutting past his ear along with the wind, Guan Xiu Wen's thoughts fluctuates, scrambling into one big mess, the person before him, is not one that can easily be dealt with, Lou Che even more so, if he is to wait for an opportune moment to take action, just how many more years.....all of a sudden, a sleeping face flashes by in his mind, evoking his infinite amount of tenderness, and thousands of thoughts flashes past his mind.

After a long moment of silence, Guan Xiu Wen puts away the painting in his sleeve, revealing a hint of smooth smile, he lightly bows towards Prince Duan, "Your highness' gift has truly given me a profoundly passionate and heavy sense of righteousness, how am I to refuse such good intentions from your highness?"

Hearing this, Prince Duan sounds a loud laughter, once again praising: "First Ranked Scholar sure is a talent of the present age, what is more rare is, you're profoundly passionate with a heavy sense of righteousness, really is praiseworthy ah."

Hearing such praises that holds ulterior motives, Guan Xiu Wen also laughs, his voice crisp and pleasant, the two people laughs with incomparable harmony within this sparsely populated officials' path, yet under such laughter, there holds other calculations.

straight to the point is **kāi mén jiàn shān /** 开门见山 which translates to **open the doors to see the mountain view**.

[2] Overwhelming force is the translated meaning of fān jiāng dǎo hǎi / 翻江倒海 – overturning rivers and pouring down seas.

With the Nu Prince is going to be showing up soon, and Guan Xiu Wen starting his plotting, it will be quite a long while till General Lin shows up again

Full



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Leaving The Capital

Over the splendid view of the city, the singing of orioles converges into a mess; down in the city, waves of spring sea smoke washes ashore.^[1]

Qu Zhou is a city, lower west from the Capital, that must be passed through, with distinctive landscape, capturing everyone's attention, it is located at the transport routes of trading businesses, which also makes it one of the Celestial Empire's bustling trading cities. The scenery of Qu Zhou is much mellower than that of the Capital, indeed described as "sound of orioles everywhere, mist and clouds bright and clear".

During the evening hours, on the ancient road outside Qu Zhou, a group of horse carriages slowly passes by, on this ancient road with little signs of human population, the occasional pedestrians that walks by, cannot help but to speculate the identity of the carriage team. In the central group, there is actually an eight horse-drawn carriage, exuding an extraordinarily imposing air, guards

surrounding the carriage in centre, neatly arranged in formation as they vigilantly advance forward......

Just when the carriage team were moving in a pace neither fast nor slow, a horse from the rear end of the road, comes galloping up, the carriage group did not stop to wait for the horse to approach, after a little while, the galloping horse had already charged in front of them, the person on the horse is dressed in purple robes with a black hat, clearly someone from the back palace, the horse's hooves lightly rises, stopping at the rear of the carriage team, and the one on the horse immediately asks loudly: "Where is Prime Minister Lou?"

The eight horse-drawn carriage is extremely spacious, with the additional steady speed, the inside of the carriage is no different to a small room, Ru Qing sits at left wall of the carriage, she picks up the plate of fruits from the small table, and turns around, looking towards Gui Wan who is staring at the scenery outside, she says: "Madam, have some fruits, once it gets to evening, we shall be arriving in Qu Zhou."

Ru Ming who is sitting next to Gui Wan, takes the plate, picking up a grape and hands it to Gui Wan.

Taking it, she had only just placed the fruit in her mouth, when the horse carriage comes to a sudden hal, Gui Wan places down the bamboo pick in hand, her eyes focusing outside, looking calm, appearing as though she is thinking about something.

Ru Qing, Ru Ming exchanges eye contact, revealing a look of helplessness, the current situation has already been happened four times, to suddenly halt the carriage right now, there is no need to ask to know that someone from the palace has come in request of Lord Prime Minister to return, ever since they have left the Capital City a day ago, people from the palace has continuously been coming forth on this road, even if one was not originally bothered by this, they too will grow fed up.

There is not a single trace of movement for a while, the carriage is still standing in its spot. Ru Qing, Ru Ming grows doubtful, the halting of the horse carriage this time, is unexpectedly long, just when the two people were pushing the task of investigating the situation to one another, a horse slowly struts up to the

carriage, Gui Wan raises her sight towards the person, faintly smiling, "Brother."

Yu Yan He's face does not look at ease, he steadily looks at Gui Wan, saying: "Gui Wan, a matter has arose in the palace....." The following words remains in his mouth, unspoken.

Hearing those words, without responding at all, Gui Wan just leisurely supports her chin with one hand, appearing not very concerned, as she quietly waits for him to speak on, seeing this, Yu Yan He lightly sighs, quietly saying: "Consort Ying is pregnant, I heard she suddenly got a stomach-ache this morning, the situation seems to be very severe, right now they are desperately calling Brother-in-law back to the palace."

Showing no reaction, Gui Wan picks up the bamboo pick and pricks into a grape, placing it into her mouth, gently chewing, and says nothing. Yu Han He felt somewhat desperate, unable to refrain from speaking: "This cannot be good, the Empress......" The slightly condemning look in Gui Wan's eyes stops him from saying the following words, shame emerges on Yu Yan He's face, he was only just reminded that there are other people here.

"Gui Wan." A mellow voice interrupts their exchange, Lou Che struts up on a horse.

Spreading a graceful smile, Gui Wan looks towards Lou Che, asking: "Has something happened?"

A great sense of guilt wells up in his heart, Lou Che attentively looks at the one inside the carriage, thinking back to leaving the Capital City the day before, his original intentions were to accompany Gui Wan in sending off Yu Yan He; secondly with the summer season approaching, he had wanted to accompany Gui Wan avoid the summer heat (spend summer break), that is why, no matter how many times the palace sent for people to urge him into returning, he would always ignore them, but right now......his hand clenches with the note in hold, Lou Che was faced with extreme difficulty.

Noticing his hesitation and difficulty, Gui Wan averts her eyes away, still smiling as per usual, a tidal wave of feelings washes over her eyes, revealing a trace of loneliness and disappointment that passes by in a flash.

"Gui Wan," His voice quiet as his calling out towards her holds an infinite amount of difficulty, "Urgent matters have arose in the palace, I need to return this once." Unable to explain the details, Lou Che felt a little annoyed, seeing Gui Wan hear this and only smile in understanding, with no other response at all, his feelings were jumbled up into a rather complex state.

Riding the horse up close to the carriage, under everyone's watchful eyes, Lou Che lowers his body, planting a soft kiss on Gui Wan's cheek, upon leaning in towards her ear, his warm breath hits the outer area of her ear as he softly says: "Wait for me, I'll quickly go and return." Having said that, he looks deep into Gui Wan's eyes, before turning around and riding off on his horse.

The guards surrounding the horse carriages, were all dumbstruck, although Prime Minister Lou's doting love for his wife is known throughout the land, but to see it personally with their own eyes, is something that they really cannot get used to, Yu Yan He also appeared absolutely baffled, watching Lou Che go behind the carriage team, giving out some sort of order, before leading eight guards as they speedily head down the road that they came from, he turns back to look at his own little sister, laughingly saying: "Looks Brother-in-law treats you......" His words comes to an abrupt stop, looking shocked as he sees Gui Wan's smile, such illusive smile, only he as an older brother would understand, just how much loss and disappointment that smile is concealing.

"Gui Wan....." A sound of soft calling, filled with the hidden meanings of Yu Yan He's worry and concern.

Hundreds of feelings gathers in her heart, indistinguishable at this moment, hearing Brother's gentle calling, Gui Wan lets out a laugh, the faint, distant laughter has grown ever so resonant, attentively gazing at Yu Yan He, she says: "Is Brother worrying about me?" When the last syllable was sounded, all traces of melancholy has already been completely swept away.

Sensing that the matter seems to concern Lou Che's leaving, Yu Yan He gently says: "We can stay at the place in front for two days, and wait for Brother-in-law's return."

"No need," Flatly rejecting this suggestion, Gui Wan's indifferent attitude causes her tone to stretch exceptionally far apart, "It is not possible for him to

hurry back, we shall continue making out way to Qu Zhou, there are still many things to do."

Hearing her say that there are still many things to do, Yu Yan He freezes for a moment, after thinking about the meaning of this, he immediately reveals a look of anxiety, unable to refrain from saying: "We need to wait till we reach Jin Yang, before we think of a plan....." The Empress situation is becoming increasingly tough, originally, only the Empress has given birth to a prince, now that Consort Ying is pregnant, if she gives birth to a son, then the Empress' only life support will also be in grave danger.

"No need to wait till Jin Yang, Brother first hurry to Jin Yang, take up your official post, I will remain in Qu Zhou for a few days." Gui Wan waves her hand, allowing for the surrounding guards to keep far away, only then can she explain to Yu Yan He.

Looking at Gui Wan with doubts and puzzlement, Yu Yan He dumbly asks: "Remain in Qu Zhou?"

Gui Wan's eyes flashes in change, from her gaze, a heart moving look flows out, those dark pupils harbouring laughter, reveals a deeply hidden beauty, "The current situation is indeed unfavourable, heaven-sent timing, favourable position, people's support, Consort Ying has ruled out two of those, to reverse this situation, apart from location and power, there still requires one word."

"What word?"

"Mouth," Unconsciously playing with the bamboo pick in hand, Gui Wan talks and laughs in leisurely manner, "A carefree and content mouth, is support of the people, it is also the only thing Consort Ying has nowhere to start laying her hands on. The current Emperor, to be able to take seat upon the imperial throne, was also dependant on what the people wished for, right now, we too can also follow this example."

He now understands what Gui Wan means. Qu Zhou is a city of trading businesses, any information can be exchanged here in the fastest possible way, news in the Capital City spreads to the outside once it passes through here, news from places all over also gathers here in Qu Zhou. Slightly sad deep inside, he asks again: "How are you going to grasp hold of the people's carefree and

content mouths?" One must know, it takes great difficulty to grasp hold of this, if poorly controlled, he is afraid that it will only backfire.

A pair of small squinted eyes, revealing a haughty attitude, Gui Wan continues to support her chin with one hand, her right hand picks up a grape with the bamboo pick as she says: "In this world, the ones that are most qualified to speak out are none other than the scholars, it has not been long since the imperial examination has ended, presumably, there are still a lot of students staying in Qu Zhou right now, to pass it through their mouths, spreading it out to the world, what could be so difficult in doing that?"

Unable to suppress the inscrutable feeling that arises deep in his heart, Yu Yan He looks straight at Gui Wan, his heart feeling two points heavier, as he slowly says: "Don't know whether dragging you into this is right or wrong?"

Quietly letting out a laugh, Gui Wan comfortingly says: "Unless I am willing, who can force me, Brother does not need to blame yourself at all."

Nodding his head twice, he was still wary at heart, Yu Yan He calls out a few orders, before riding away. After a while of rest, the entire carriage team once again sets off, slowly heading towards Qu Zhou.

Lying inside the carriage, Gui Wan's eyes locks onto Ru Qing, Ru Ming, her resonant voice revealing no emotions: "You two heard everything just now?"

Ru Qing, Ru Ming, nods at the same time: "We did."

"Right now you can make a choice," Gui Wan with delicate demeanour, lightly speaks: "Loyal to me, or loyal to Lord Husband."

Never did they think they would hear such a question, Ru Qing, Ru Ming looks at each other, not quite understanding the meaning in this, in that moment, they did not dare to reply.

The carriage curtain has already been let down, the lighting inside dim, so quiet that not even one human voice can be heard, only the turning wheels and the horse hooves from outside travels into one's ears, the dullness making one feel a sense of suffocation.

A faint smile spreads out, Gui Wan suddenly sounds a laugh, half teasing half serious: "Do not worry.....you do not necessarily have to reply."

The two maids simultaneously sighs in relief, they had almost thought that what happened just now was just a dream, peering at Gui Wan, deeply unpredictable within the darkness, suddenly they hear Gui Wan order: "Prepare male attires, after we enter Qu Zhou, we will only keep eight bodyguards with us, the rest of the guards shall remain at the outskirts of Qu Zhou."

Ru Ming was puzzled, her face filled with panic: "Wouldn't this be dangerous?"

"The ones we are dealing with are frail scholars, there will not be any danger."

Able to make out Gui Wan's reluctance to explain, Ru Qing nods as she answers with a sound of 'yes', and the inside of the carriage restores its quietness.

In the evening, the inside of Qu Zhou's rest inn was a scene of liveliness, Qu Zhou is originally a city rich in business, with a complex flow of people, in this resting area right now, talking with eloquence, people staggers around.

The head of the rest inn has drank quite a few cups of wine, he cheerfully stands out in the lobby, playing finger guessing game (drinking game) with people, suddenly his ear is pulled up, feeling the burning pain, he looks back, to see his own madam, and hurriedly smiles apologetically: "Madam, why have you come down?" His madam is famed throughout the entire Qu Zhou, nicknamed "Fiery Xi Shi", famed for her beauty and hot temper. (Note: Xi Shi is one of the renowned Four Great Beauties of China, her name is often used to refer to one as a great beauty)

"Xiao Ya Zi has called for you a few times, you only know how to guess fingers, neglecting serious matters....." Upon seeing the married couple start a squabble, everyone comes crashing down in laughter, the familiar people all know this is how the couple get along, it has also made its way to become the butt of all jokes in Qu Zhou.

Right when the two people were busy arguing, a worker runs into the lobby, yelling out: "Sir, Madam, there's customers at the door."

Fiery Xi Shi throws him a dirty look, shouting: "If there's customers, do you not know how to serve them, what you stood peeping at....."

Just when her voice faded down, eight brawny men enters with expressionless

faces, separating into two rows, four people in a line at the entrance of the lobby. Complete silence suddenly falls upon the lobby, the gathering of people all stares at the doors.

Just when the eight men stood in place, behind, three people walks in, the two in front strangely behaved the same, be it actions or expression, appearing to be delicate and pretty young men, but upon closer inspection, the rouge and powder scent is too heavy, they were actually women in disguise, everyone were doubtful and puzzled, then looking towards the final person at the back, their breathing suddenly stops.

Glorious air shining bright, cute and handsome yet stunningly beautiful, a body of gradient light blue-white outfit, at the crown of the head, hair tied up in a silver ribbon, elegantly beautiful posture of great nobility, a light smile that doesn't leave the lips, on the left ear, a string of black pearl earrings falls to the shoulder, lightly swaying along with the person's movements, beaming radiance overflows, against her graceful beauty, everything else is dissolves to nothing, between light and dark, such unique charm is far too extraordinary.

Clearly knowing the person is a woman in disguise, everyone still gets the kind of feeling like they cannot breathe, such demonic beauty that trespass the boundaries of gender, within the huge lobby, be it men or women, all were stunned speechless.

Ru Qing steps forward, speaking towards the head of the rest inn and Fiery Xi Shi who stands in the middle of the lobby: "We would like to have the room on the second and a half floor." Her speech breaks through the silence, and only then does the big lobby restores its original complex mix of voices.

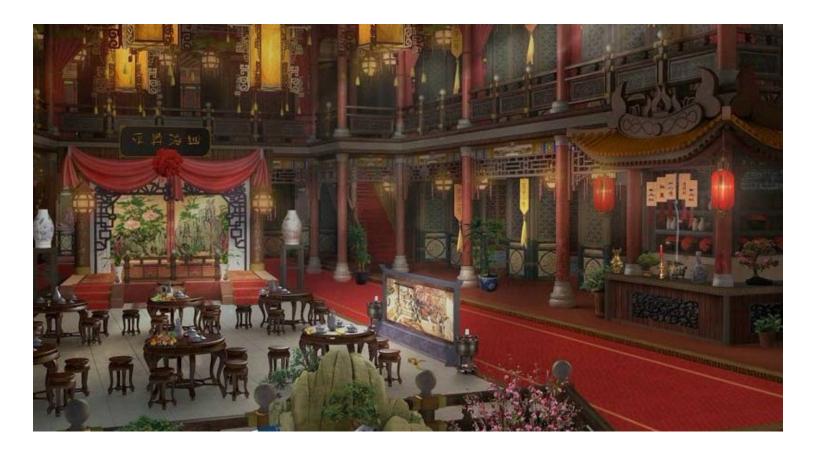
Fiery Xi Shi hurriedly nods her head, unable to refrain from casting Gui Wan a glance, secretly thinking there are still characters such as this in the world, attentively saying: "Got it, there is a honoured guest room on the second floor, usually unoccupied, perfect for all of you to enjoy the use of."

Gui Wan reveals a sparse and thin smile, striding forward towards the second floor, studying the surrounding environment, quite satisfied, her thoughts quietly takes a turn, and already thinks of a sure plan, it is at this place, she shall borrow the carefree and content mouths for use.

[1] Yet another chapter opening up with a poem. The poem is called **Magnolia** and is by **Qián wéi yǎn /** 錢惟演. I have translated the whole poem <u>here</u> for those interested.

A pretty short-ish update, not much goes on here, just a load of prepping for things to come, but things definitely gets interesting in the next chapter hehehe......

Full



CHAPTER TWELVE

Why Not Get Drunk?

Peach blossom planted and exposed in heaven, is not [like] the typical flowers found on earth.^[1]

Summer is soon here, the chilly air has already left, and the morning sun warmly shines upon the people. Fiery Xi Shi has been awakened from her dreams, mumbling her curses: "They don't even think to let people have a nice sleep, coming earlier day by day."

Walking to the front, Xiao Ya Zi hears this and looks back, grinning as he says: "Ever since the gentlemen upstairs started staying here, our place has been getting busier day by day."

Instantly sending him a sharp glare, Fiery Xi Shi scolds: "Who told you to speak?" Inside, she was overcome with confusion, the night five days ago, after that exceptionally beautiful "young man" came in, the rest inn has indeed been

getting busier and busier by the day, that esteemed guest whose name is unknown, spent the first two days with refined scholars of Qu Zhou, drinking tea and discussing literary, then after the two days, stopped doing so, the people who were interested also came in swarms, towards such a trend, Fiery Xi Shi does not like it and is indeed shocked, a sense of unease quietly enveloping her heart.

She has read countless people, yet she just cannot guess the identity of this esteemed guest at all, but from looking at the person's behaviour these past two days, she senses that the matter is not actually as simple as drinking tea and discussing literary, as for what exactly the key to this is, at the moment, she cannot really explain it herself.

"Madam, they're here." Xiao Ya Zi's flippantly cheeky voice shocks her awake, looking over the lobby, even her head was starting to hurt, could it be that all the scholars in the world has gathered in this rest in?

Discreetly sounding a cry, she pulls on an over exaggerated smile, greeting the masses of black headed people below: "Gentlemen, why has everyone gotten up so early today?"

The majority of the scholars within the lobby, raises their heads, upon seeing someone slowly make their way down from upstairs, a tall and thin person of scholarly appearance, rises and returns the gesture, "Madam, has the gentleman woke up yet?"

Within the big lobby, not one person knows what the unfamiliar guest is called, amongst them, there were also those that have not even seen "his" face before, although they know that the person can very possibly be a lady, they still follow the attendants addressing of "gentleman", hence the word "gentleman" becoming "his" exclusive addressment.

A professional smile hung on her face as Fiery Xi Shi answers: "The gentleman's hour of rising, you should all know already, no matter how much earlier you wait, it is no use, it is better if you all come back in an hours count." She lightly waves her hand, advising them to return home, unfortunately, the people in the lobby showed not a single response, not one person had any thoughts of leaving.

Lightly sighing, Fiery Xi Shi turns back and shouts towards Xiao Ya Zi: "Quickly

go prepare breakfast for everyone, or else in a while, they wouldn't have the strength to hold a 'literary meeting'." Thinking that it is no use speaking to these blockheads anymore, even her hospitableness to serve the customers has completely disappeared without a trace, Fiery Xi Shi turns around and heads upstairs.

Walking down the hallway, she reaches the semi-layer that the esteemed guest is staying in, halting her steps, she quietly thinks to herself for a moment, and then leisurely walks over, as she has expected, she sees the maids Ru Qing, Ru Ming heading towards the floral hall with an incense burner, presumably in preparation for receiving the guests in a while, she takes three steps forwards, calling out to Ru Qing: "Maid Qing, has your master gotten up?" (Note: The floral hall is the Chinese equivalent of drawing room – a room aside from the main living room where guests can be received and entertained)

Hearing her voice, the two maids turns towards her, seeing that it is Fiery Xi Shi, they both reveal a sweet smile, probably because Fiery Xi Shi is open and direct by nature, Ru Qing, Ru Ming have gotten familiar with her in such a short time, Ru Qing greets first: "Gentleman is already up, in the floral hall." Fiery Xi Shi hurries forward, approaching the two maids, the three of them chatting and laughing, as they head towards the floral hall.

At the floral hall, one can see the eight brawny men expressionlessly guarding every corner of the floral hall, Fiery Xi Shi is no longer bewildered by this scene, she had long realised, the esteemed guest is never left alone, if not the two maids then there are the eight personal bodyguards, creating a sense of being heavily guarded.

"Is it San Niang there?" A voice as fragile as jade sounds, ringing out from behind the curtains, her tone neither hurried nor delayed, smoothly carrying a rhythm, a feeling like that of each syllable rippling through one's heart.

Fiery Xi Shi's birth name is San Niang, just that it has been many years since people called her that, to hear it right now, it actually feels as though she is in a dream, hurriedly replying: "Gentleman, it is I." Walking up to the curtains, she stops at a spot five steps away, these past five days, "gentleman' would always be separated behind the curtains when meeting the guests, and would never let anyone come within a five step radius, five steps, thus became the strict rule.

"San Niang is no outsider." The figure behind the curtains lightly says, upon hearing this, the two maids immediately steps forward, rolling up the curtains.

Directly facing the one behind the curtains, San Niang could not supress sighing in praise, the person's peerless elegance, even as a woman, she cannot compare to such, laughingly saying: "Gentleman, you have gotten up so early today."

Looking at Fiery Xi Shi in admiration, the corners of Gui Wan's lips hooks up into a beautiful curve, she had not seen such straightforward attitude for a long time, and especially likes it, "San Niang has also gotten up really early."

"Those scholars have been coming earlier by the days, I too have no choice," Having said that, she quietly observes the "gentleman's" attitude, unexpectedly, the opposition only smiles indifferently, showing no clear indications at all.

Not knowing whether to call it disappointment or whether other emotions are rising inside of her, Fiery Xi Shi sounds a sigh, when suddenly, she smells a faint and clear, flower-like fragrance, turning her head towards it, on the other side of the curtain, a flask of wine rests on the table, as someone who has excessively loved wine her entire lifetime, she hastily asks without restraint: "Gentleman, what wine is this? So fragrant."

"Plum blossom wine."

"Plum blossom wine? So it was brewed with plum blossoms, no wonder the fragrance is so faint and clear." Full of praises, Fiery Xi Shi happily says this.

Hands casually stoking the neck of the wine flask, Gui Wan silently sinks into her thoughts for a moment, seeming to have recalled something, "Since San Niang is so fond of it, go ahead and take it." Gently giving the wine a push towards her, allowing Ru Ming to pass it to Fiery Xi Shi.

Fireworks sounding inside of her, Fiery Xi Shi murmurs: "This wouldn't be right, is this not taking away someone's goods?" Suddenly raising her head again, saying: "Gentleman has yet to eat breakfast, and you're drinking wine?"

"Not drinking, smelling." Lazily explaining, Gui Wan smiles as she watches Fiery Xi Shi take one big mouthful of wine.

Mouth filled with aroma, she smacks her lips together in satisfaction, Fiery Xi

Shi quips: "Can you get full from smelling?"

"That is not it, I originally thought that smelling it will be able to get me three points drunk, who would have known that I am still so wide awake." Half-jokingly answering her question, Gui Wan lightly raises her brows, a look of innocence immediately revealed.

Slightly stunned, Fiery Xi Shi loudly laughs, "Gentleman must be joking, only by drinking the entire flask, do you have the possibility of getting drunk."

Gui Wan also laughs along, three points of frivolousness revealed between her brows, "San Niang you're already drunk....." Spoken in a sighing tone, making Fiery Xi Shi shocked.

Composing herself, she once again looks over the person in front, Fiery Xi Shi seriously asks: "Is Gentleman afraid of getting drunk?"

"I am," Gui Wan sits up straight, her eyes deep and bottomless, "This thing called wine, is it not something that can only be savoured when half drunk, half sober?"

"If you have not been completely drunk, how could you know that the feeling of being completely drunk is not any better than being half drunk? Has Gentleman never heard before, this thing called wine is a thing that dispels grief? If not drunk, how is one to dispel grief?"

Hearing those words, Gui Wan reveals a look of confusion, lightly repeating Fiery Xi Shi's words once again, seemingly hit with realisation, seemingly hit with regret......thinking for a while, she suddenly brightens up again, that resonant voice even more penetrating as she lightly laments: "What limits the affection of slightly cold weather and drizzling rain holds, unable to prevent the passing of spring. What harm is there in getting drunk for one's lord, only afraid when sobered up, the heartbreak that follows......" [1]

Holding the half-filled flask of wine, unable to bring herself to drink it, Fiery Xi Shi quietly stares at the "gentleman", only feeling that her every move blends in with her carefree beauty, her every syllable, every tone, is able to touch people's hearts, like a light breeze beckoning people to dance along with her, intoxicated by her, just now, the slightly sad feelings she portrayed, clearly travels across in

this moment, affecting Fiery Xi Shi's own feelings, discreetly pulling herself together, she laughingly says: "Gentleman has such refined interests."

As though she did not hear those words, Gui Wan laments: "I originally thought everyone is drunk, only I alone am sober, didn't think that, it is actually everyone who is sober, I alone am drunk ah......" Such tender voice faintly disperses in the air, not minding if anyone hears, upon raising her head, she sees Fiery Xi Shi's puzzled expression, Gui Wan could not help but to laugh, laughing prettily without restraint, she diverts to another topic: "San Niang, can you tell me, what are the rumours circulating around town lately?"

Suddenly snapped back to reality, Fiery Xi Shi was secretly amazed, this "gentleman" has many changes in expression, suddenly angry, suddenly laughing, suddenly displeased, suddenly worried, her thoughts makes it hard for others to read, hearing her question, she slowly starts speaking, recently there has been certain ballads circulating around town, singing of a beauty bringing disaster to the country, the monarch loves beauty, does not love the country.

Listening to Fiery Xi Shi describe in detail the sudden increase of rumours outside these days, Gui Wan's thoughts were half in the light, half in the shade, seemingly smiling yet seemingly not smiling, unable to make out whether it is joy or sorrow, content or worries......



Standing at the counter of the rest inn, managing the accounts whilst sending her regards to the leaving customers, Fiery Xi Shi's thoughts spins, her mind continuously playing back this morning's conversation in the floral hall, she just gets the feeling that that "gentleman" is deeply unpredictable, whilst still conversing, she asked the "gentleman", whether she thinks those ballads are right or wrong, the "gentleman" sounds a faint laugh, asking back, what worldly matters are definitely right or definitely wrong, everyone is only showcasing their abilities.

Is it the case of everyone showing their abilities? Smiling as she shakes her head, personally thinking that she has been confused by the "gentleman", because of her one phrase, she herself has been in a restless all day today.

Raising her head, the customers have pretty much all left, stretching her lazy waist, she walks out from the behind the counter, Fiery Xi Shi was just about to shout out to the dozing Xiao Ya Zi to close the business, when she glances outside to see a few horses and a horse carriage stop outside the rest inn, looks like there are yet another group of customers, restoring her smile, she stands at the doors, waiting to serve the customers.

Dismounting from the horse, getting off the carriage, there are actually six people who has come, smiling deeper, she thinks to herself, these past two days,

the rest inn practically seems to have won a fortune, watching as the people approaches, her smile stiffens, the six people are dressed strangely, is very different to the Celestial Empire, they are clearly Nu people, the Celestial Empire has always shared a hostile relationship with the Nu, her rest inn have never served Nu people before, walking upfront, she blocks their path, smiling as she says: "Everybody, our rest inn has already ran out of room."

Suddenly realising that amongst the six people, there is a bright and beautiful woman, brilliantly smiling to her, without the chance to let that smile sink in, her shoulder is hit with pain, and her vision turns black as she involuntarily sinks down.....

"Mo Na, tone down your actions, careful no one finds out." The voice comes from the mouth of a young man, with a built taller and stronger than that of the Celestial Empire, further showing his extraordinary looks and mightiness, a pair of eagle-like eyes reveals sharpness, carrying a domineering air and imposing manner by nature.

"Your highness can rest assured, there is practically no one in this big lobby right now, we won't be found out." The woman called Mo Na charmingly smiles, further showing her incomparably bright looks, remarkably touching.

Giving her a nod that practically could not be seen, he looks upstairs with complex feelings, it is upstairs, where "he" is staying right, the one who saved him under the moonlight and also the one who planned to harm him, the one who he cannot indulge his feeling for, the one who has left him absolutely captivated and also the one who makes him gnash his teeth in hatred......

The dozing Xiao Ya Zi in the rest inn, has yet to grow aware, six strangers have broken into the rest inn.

Only the two lanterns hung at the entrance, is unceasingly swaying in the wind, the light scattering, light and dark overlapping, making the moonlight in the darkness set off an extremely unusual eeriness......

The fifth day.....is it already the fifth day?

Finger lightly tapping on the wine flask, rhythmically, slowly, feeling an icy

coolness at the tip of her fingers, Gui Wan finds it pleasantly soothing, the smell of clear and light fragrance lingers in her nose, gradually blurring her sober tenacity, looking a bit like she is in a trance, she looks at the wine flask, prettily smiling as she sighs, could it be that she is drunk?

The one who clearly said would rush there and rush back when leaving, has still yet to show up.....unable to tell whether it is disappointment or melancholy inside of her, she still smiles ever so freely, just that she feels faintly stuffy inside, inadvertently entangled......

Finger tapping on the lid of the pot, a light sound suddenly rings, Gui Wan was momentarily surprised, and only then did she realise she used a bit too much strength, laughing to herself, she places down the pot lid in hand, capping it back onto the wine flask, and at the same time, covering that clear and light fragrance. She gathers up her disconsolate musings and looks outside the curtains, the scholars have all left, only Ru Qing, Ru Ming remains standing in waiting within this floral hall.

Gui Wan lifts the curtains and walks out of the floral hall, raising her head to take a look, the skies has actually darkened already, after such a tiring day, it is time to get some rest, she faintly smiles as she waves her hand, signifying her intentions to return to her room.

Ru Qing, Ru Ming leads the way in front whilst the eight guards follows behind, the group of people heading towards the second floor room.

As they were walking up the stairs, a lady on the second floor walks towards them, her complexion a sickly wax yellow, movements particularly slow, carrying the appearance of one who is ill, her hands carries two pots of food dishes as she walks down the stairs. The stairs are very narrow, Ru Qing, Ru Ming could only turn to their sides in order to let her past, just when they moved aside, the woman seems to have received a fright upon seeing so many people, her foot slips and she loses her balance, her body tilts forward, about to fall down the stairs, Ru Qing, Ru Ming simultaneously reaches out, one on the left, one on the right, holding her body up from the sides, the two pots of dishes instantly flips onto both their bodies. The two maids, afraid that Gui Wan behind them will be harmed, lightly creases their brows, neither dodging nor giving way, they simply allow all the soup and sauce of the dishes to splash all over their bodies.

The woman realises the disaster she has caused, hurriedly bowing in apology, repeatedly bowing down to waist level, Ru Qing, Ru Ming sees how pitiful she is, and could not bear to further reproach her, fortunately, only their clothes had been dirty, no harm was actually inflicted.

Upon returning to the second floor, the eight guards automatically disperses into their own room, Gui Wan quickly orders Ru Qing, Ru Ming to go change their clothes, watching the two maids take out clothes and quickly heading to the bathroom with flying speed, Gui Wan could not help but smile, walking into the room, she pours a cup of tea, upon lowering her head, she finds that her own outer clothing has also been splashed with a few drops of sauces, lightly creasing her brows, she places down the cup in hand and walks into the inner chambers, untying the jade buckle on her waist, the silver belt slides down from her waist, and she slowly takes off her outer clothing.

Suddenly getting a really strange feeling that greatly bothers her, Gui Wan clearly senses the presence of a second person within the room, halting her movements, she was in the midst of speculating when suddenly, the sound of drinking tea can be heard from behind her, her heart receives a sudden fright, beating several times faster, she was rendered a flustered state as she slowly looks back.

It's him!

Ye Li sits at the table holding the cup of tea she had just poured, taking his sweet time in savouring the taste. Upon seeing this scene, Gui Wan only found it incessantly absurd, her mind completely blank, immediately sensing the dangerous vibe, lightly pressing her lips together, she was hesitating whether to cry out loud or not, calling over the guards, but immediately abandons this thought, Ye Li's attitude is too laidback, giving her an unfathomable feeling.

"Your bodyguards cannot come right now, no need to waste your efforts," Ye Li leisurely takes a drink of tea, his gaze firmly locked onto Gui Wan, half containing enjoyment, half containing complexity, "Long time no see, Yu Wan."

That lengthened tone of addressment, spoken from his somewhat stiff accent, slightly seems as though he is bitterly clenching his teeth in hatred, Gui Wan is slightly startled, hundreds and thousands of thoughts running through her head.

Steadying her emotions, she calmly smiles sweetly, looking as though she has run into an old friend, "So it is Brother Ye Li."

Didn't think that she would actually be so carefree, Ye Li's expression suddenly deepens, coldly saying: "Didn't think that I would still be alive to see you again."

"Brother Ye Li is no ordinary person, so how could you possibly run into mishaps?" Voice of orioles, pleasing and gentle, Gui Wan's smile remains unchanging, refusing to retreat and instead advances, she takes two steps forward, her slow steps reaching the outer chamber, turning a blind eye to Ye Li's solemn expression, she takes hold of the teapot and a cup, self-servingly pouring herself a cup of tea, handing it over to Ye Li, she laughingly says: "To any offences caused, may Brother Ye Li forgive magnanimously."

Gazing down at the tea before his eyes, Ye Li could not bring himself to say anything, the original scenario he had envisioned in mind is significantly different to this, the person before him has cut straight to the point, pouring him a cup of tea in efforts to make amends, causing him to feel at loss, watching the tea leaves float around on the water surface, his feelings becomes even more complex.

Unable to stop himself, he thinks back to the severe injuries from last time, it was also a situation where this pretty and handsome "young man" held a cup of ginseng soup, standing by the bedside, somewhere in his heart, he was touched for a moment, reaching out to accept the tea, drinking it in one gulp.

Seeing him down the tea, Gui Wan's heart relaxes a little, she sits herself down at the other side of the table, sitting at the same table with Ye Li, comfortably chatting as she would with family: "Brother Ye Li, it's been half a year, your charismatic demeanour is even more radiant, it must be because your injuries from before have completely healed right?"

Each and every sound ringing at his heart, each and every word sincere, Ye Li was startled for a moment, his cold expression loosens up a bit as he lightly answers with a sound of "En."

The two of them quietly sits there, Gui Wan leisurely chats about all sorts of things, Ye Li's expression has also calmed down, the two of them appearing as though they returned to the days of recuperating in the old building.

Seeing that Ye Li no longer seems to be in dispute, Gui Wan secretly relaxes, on one hand she was chatting none stop, on the other hand she rapidly has a change in thought, thinking of a way to get away.

Ye Li also was not as calm on the inside as his outer expression shows, looking at the Gui Wan before him, the chaotic feelings causes unrest within him as he finds it difficult to think properly. He has been betrayed by the one before him once before, but managed to fled back to the Nu, this past half of the year, he has never once been able to forget this woman, his heart always missing her, as long as he sees her, he definitely would not easily let go of the opportunity.

He got people to paint a portrait of her, because the appearance was drawn from words, the painting eventually took two whole months, going through a change of over ten artists, to actually produce the final outcome that he was satisfied with. At the time, he had even been teased by his older brothers, it does not seem to be painting an enemy, seems more like painting his beloved.

His beloved? Turning his head to see her smile like that of spring flowers, his heart bursts into waves of throbbing, originally thinking that he wanted to see her only for payback, but only when seeing her today, did he realise how severely wrong he was, turns out, he had only wanted to see her once again......

"Didn't think that you are actually Lou Che's wife....." In the midst of thinking, the words had already left his mouth.

Shocked, Gui Wan was completely caught by surprise, she herself has never spoke of her identity, how could he have known? Deep inside, she lets out a wretched cry, on the outside, she simple answers: "Brother Ye Li really is infinitely resourceful." [2] There seems to be praising, seems to be sighing.

Attentively observing her, Ye Li's eyes shines brilliantly, "I believe.....your husband must extremely dote on you."

The look in his eyes puts her in an uncomfortable position, Gui Wan lightly laughs, weakly asking: "Brother Ye Li, exactly what are you trying to get at?"

"Has he not told you, the matter of me sending a painting from a thousand li away?" Once the words left his mouth, his hand suddenly reaches out, across half the table, grasping hold of Gui Wan's fair wrist.

In a blink of an eye, her wrist had been firmly seized, Gui Wan conceals her shock, her wrist jolts, but does not move in the slightest bit, anger rushes up to her head, considering the current situation, she does not take any action, saying: "You baffle me, exactly what is this matter?" Vaguely getting the feeling that someone had leaked her whereabouts to Ye Li, a sense of unease overcomes her heart.

Ye Li stands from his seat, leaning over before Gui Wan's face, Gui Wan receives a shock, immediately standing up to retreat, unfortunately, her wrist had been seized, Ye Li's one exertion of strength pulls her into his arms, sitting himself down in Gui Wan's seat.

Anger further deepens, within Gui Wan's smile there holds iciness, "Even if you are the Nu Tribe's prince, this is still far too presumptuous of you."

Sensing the anger from the person in his embrace, Ye Li laughs, ridiculing: "And here I thought you don't get angry....." Looking at her, he suddenly speaks again, "Your angered face is also very beautiful."

Taking in a deep breath, she calms down, a shallow smile once again resurfaces, "Brother Ye Li, what exactly is it you want?"

"We Nu people are unable to be deeply treacherous like people of the Celestial Empire," Such words hidden with cold bitterness, Ye Li says, "What we want, shall all be directly snatched over, as for me right now....." Half of the sentence remains hanging, with unlimited gentle charm, his words carrying ambiguity......

With a turn of the head, she directly meets Ye Li's eyes, outpouring with affection, heartbeat quickening, Gui Wan freezes, her mouth half opened, yet her voice refuses to come out.

"Gui Wan...Gui Wan.....you're called Gui Wan?" Ye Li with but an inch distant away from Gui Wan's cheek, gently calls out her name, with unlimited tenderness, disregarding the stiffened body of the person in his arms, he laments, "To think you even lied to me about your name."

Hearing the light calling of her own name from his mouth, Gui Wan's entire body turns stiff, but also becomes even more certain of her own speculations, someone had leaked out the information, if not, with thousands of mountains and rivers distance, how could Ye Li possibly have such crystal clear knowledge of

"From now on, let us just call you Suo Ge Ta, after you return to the Nu Capital with me, you will be Suo Ge Ta from henceforth." His words with such certainty displays his firm confidence.

What an imperious barbarian, to even change her name for her, Gui Wan's brows lightly raises, she speaks surely: "Brother Ye Li must be joking, I am Madam Lou, how could I possibly go to the Nu Capital?" Her words hidden with warning, this place is also a city in the heart of the Celestial Empire, her identity is not one that anyone can casually profane.

Lightly letting out a laugh, Ye Li could not help but to scoop up a few strands of her hair, seeing the strands of black satin in his hand, an unknown feeling of satisfaction suddenly arises, "Had I not made infallible preparations, how could I have come here so rashly......Suo Ge Ta, come with me back to the Nu Capital, I will love and cherish you for a lifetime."

A wave of quivering hits her heart, Gui Wan freezes on the spot, hundreds of different feelings gathering within her, she recalls how someone has once also seemed to have promised her this before. Secretly lamenting, she voices out a reminder, her tone completely icy with not a trace of feelings: "As long as I go missing for three days, all official roads will set up strict precautions, you cannot possibly return to the Nu Capital safely."

"If you do not try, how could you possibly know?" Ye Li's face reveals a look of teasing, he tightens his embrace on Gui Wan, speaking into her ear, "Follow me back, hm?"

Feelings of anger rises up, she had yet to say something, when a wave of dizzy spells hits her, her body loses control of itself as she falls backwards, completely sinking into Ye Li's arms, unable to muster up the slightest bit of strength, her heart starts to panic, knowing her situation has lost the oppurtunity of initiating a move, she has already fallen like the wind.

Aware of her unwillingness, Ye Li hugs her, lightly persuading: "What he can give, I can give you all the same, don't struggle, the one who will be hurt will only be yourself." Hand reaching her soft and delicate face, his eyes filled with tenderness and firmness.

Slightly parting her lips, she finds that she does not even have the strength to speak, Gui Wan's heart sinks, she could only leave him to place her on the bed and watch as he walks to the door, after calling out towards the other side of the door, a figure walks in, to think that it would actually be the woman at the stairs with a sickly complexion, and even had a bad fall, helplessly, she lets out a sigh, so from the very beginning, she had fallen into the trap.

The girl with a wax yellow complexion enters the room, taking a look at Gui Wan from left to right, sizing her up from top to bottom, before revealing a smile, opening her mouth to say: "Your highness has good eyes."

A shallow smile surfaces on Ye Li's face, "There's not much time, Mo Na, quickly change her outfit."

The wax yellow complexion girl nods her head, saying: "Let me make preparations." She once again leaves the room door, not long after, she comes in holding a face washing basin, approaching the bed.

Upon seeing her face, Gui Wan was surprised, clothes unchanged, but that face of sickly wax yellow complexion actually transformed into one that is beautiful and captivating, the sickly appearance of before gone, immediately knowing this is her real appearance, Gui Wan also becomes aware that she is an expert of disguises.

Thinking of the capable people Ye Li has brought along with him, clearly they have come fully prepared, giving up her struggles, she leaves the girl called Mo Na to have her way with her. Deep inside, she secretly ponders, looks like she can only act in accordance to the circumstances, whilst thinking of countermeasures.

- [1] Opening poem Anxiety of a Beauty by Qín Guān / 秦观.
- [2] The proverb for **infinitely resourceful** in Chinese is **shén tōng guǎng dà /** 神通广大 literally meaning **of heavenly powers and extensive reach**. A term used to refer to one's **superb skills and abilities**, and can also be translated as **omnipotence**.

As everyone has been expecting for a while now, the troublemaker finally strikes again! I know everyone's been left disappointed by Lou Che in the last chapter, and I really don't blame you guys, seriously, even if he is the one Gui

Wan likes, he really doesn't prove himself to be a reliable one does he? If he didn't leave like that, perhaps he would have earned himself more points with the oppurtunity to protect Gui Wan from Ye Li right now, but then again, there's no fun if Ye Li didn't get his way for now right? Haha

Full



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Helpless

"Lady Consort, the wind is strong here, your body is weak, please may you return to the palace." Palace maid Miao Ye feebly voices out, anxiously looking at the beautiful person before her as she gently persuades.

The words lightly drifts past her ears, not at all transmitting to her head, Yao Ying unconsciously nods her head, but does not make a single move, only looking down from the palace walls absent-mindedly.

Silently letting out a sigh, Miao Ye no longer says anything more, standing behind Yao Ying as she quietly watches this doted consort within the inner palace, brows locked in a knitted position, deep in her heart, mixed feelings with all sorts of ups and downs welling up. Since Consort Ying first entered the palace, she has been serving her by her side, many matters seen in the eye, but understood in the heart, it is just unfortunate she is unable to speak her own mind, if not, she would definitely advice this stunningly beautiful girl, worldly matters cannot be forcibly pressed, only by letting go of others can one let go of oneself.

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The passing of time is like a grater grating at Yao Ying's patience and faith, gradually generating an emotional turmoil within, could it be that he really isn't coming? Lightly, she shakes of such absurd thoughts in her heart, telling herself, news of him returning to the Capital had already been sent to her this morning, there is no way he won't be coming......blindly making all sorts of disorderly thoughts on one hand, whilst comforting herself on the other, she holds such complex emotions as she quietly waits.

Miao Ye looks at Consort Ying's face noticeably pale and weak, considering that she is already a pregnant woman, she grits her teeth, intending to walk up front, she shall pull Consort Ying away no matter what, just as she was thinking this, she suddenly sees Consort Ying's eyes widen, the originally beautifully shaped lips forms an even prettier curve, her face suddenly turning gloriously radiant, brilliant and moving, Miao Ye had actually froze, unable to respond in any way.

"Miao Ye, he's come, let us quickly return to the palace and await for him." Smiling so sweetly as she turns back, dazzling all the maids and eunuchs behind her, Yao Ying joyfully speaks, the smile on her face shining with deeply moving innocence. Not waiting for others' reaction, Yao Ying walks down from the stairs of the palace platform, leading the way towards the direction of Jing Yi Palace.

Miao Ye hurriedly follows after, the words calling out for Consort Ying to slow down had yet to leave her lips, when the one half jogging in front, Yao Ying suddenly halts her steps, turning back around, actually wearing somewhat of a worried look, Miao Ye was puzzled, when Consort Ying's doubtful voice travels to her ears: "Am I looking really ugly right now?"

Seeing Consort Ying ask this with such seriousness, Miao Ye honestly answers: "Not ugly, this servant has truly never seen anyone who is more beautiful than Lady Consort." Also, because the wind had already dishevelled her hair slightly, it even more shows another side of Consort Ying, passionately poetic.

Unfortunately the palace maid's response did not give her the slightest bit of confidence, her hand reaches up to gently stroke her hair, Yao Ying orders: "Quickly return to the palace, I need to tidy up my appearance." Turning around, she immediately increases her speed as she heads towards the inner palace.

A girl will doll herself up for the one she loves, this phrase is not at all wrong. Thinking this, Miao Ye hurriedly follows behind.

Waves of faintly fragrant incense smoke drifts around in the air, heavily luxuriant, as though inviting people into deep intoxication, the entire palace hall because of the withdrawal of the palace maids and guards alike, opens up into an emptier, quieter, darker space. Lou Che enters the inner chambers of Jing Yi Palace, his brows locked in a crease, the usual faint smile hanging on his face. Towards the inner chambers, with a tone neither urgent, neither slow, neither loud, neither quiet, he calls out: "This subject Lou Che greets Lady Consort, may Lady Consort forever be safely at peace."

Once his voice steadily travels in, the long curtain is suddenly lifted by someone, a beautiful women in palace attire slowly walks out, her clothing originally of the world's most luxurious brocade, the most skilful needlework, if worn by others, the clothing will definitely display its glory, but when worn by Consort Ying, it actually appears even more peerlessly beautiful, such beauty that overturns states and cities.

"You've finally came." Her tone carrying complain, as though blaming, as though happy.

Indifferently sweeping his eyes across the person before him, Lou Che's tone is as calm as still water: "This subject has but only left the Capital for three days."

"Three days?" As though feeling hurt by Lou Che's coldness, Yao Ying's light, tenderly pretty voice slightly quivers, "These three days have been longer than that of a year ah~."

Declining to comment, Lou Che remains silent, solemnly standing near the doors of the inner chambers.

Unease and dejection rapidly flashing by the face, and with another change, a sweet smile replaces the fleeting expressions, Yao Ying sweet and delicate voice calls out: "Che, come in and take a seat."

"This subject dares not to act rashly, Lady Consort is expecting a child, it is best to take good care of your body. Now that I see Lady Consort is safe and sound, this subject's heart is put at ease, and hopes to request my leave." Lou Che pays his respect, intending to turn around and leave just like that.

"Wait." A tenderly desperate voice suddenly sounds, even Yao Ying herself was surprised, she heartbreakingly says, "Do you think that I used mild illness as a reason to cheat you back? Are you mad at me? I really did not lie to you." Each word like a sob, with unlimited desolation, wanting to restore some of the things she has gradually lost.

Attentively staring at that sort of face that one cannot help but to be moved by^[1], Lou Che loosens up his expression a bit, gently consoling: "I do not blame you, nor am I mad at you....." It is just that he is regretful, why did he have rushed back when they were outside Qu Zhou City?

Hearing his answer, seeing his expression like a stranger to her, she does not feel relieved, and instead feels even more sorrowful, softly saying: "Do you already not care anymore? Towards everything regarding me, do you not care at all now?"

His feelings moved by such soft voice of hers, Lou Che bitterly smiles: "You are already pregnant now, don't think too much, just take care of yourself."

"Why do I have to take care, why? Why do I have conceive the child of a man I do not love......?" Her emotions had almost come crashing down, because of the suspicions and jealousy held in for a long time, the longing endlessly torturing her exhausted heart, in this moment, she loses the reason that she had dressed up for, neglecting any sort of manners or bearings, not caring for the appearance she had just tidied up, Yao Ying let loose the tears and weeps aloud.

Shocked by the situation before him, Lou Che's brows tightly knits together, walking up front, he looks at Yao Ying whose face is already filled with tears, saying: "Ying-er.....calm down, I need to talk to you."

Aware of her own impropriety and distress, Yao Ying was also rather embarrassed, taking in a deep breath, the sounds of weeping gradually comes to a rest, an upright bearing stands presently as she calms down her strained heart, tenderly looking at Lou Che, waiting for him to speak.

After signalling for her to sit at the settee, he takes a seat nearby, his face of

such radiantly warm elegance, showing indistinguishable emotions as he says in a low tone: "In future when your child is born, if it's a boy, it may very possibly become the next generation of monarch......" Ignoring Yao Ying's expression of complexity, he continues explaining his analysis, "I believe you should be able to sense, just how much the his majesty loves you, not caring for other people's perception, three thousand worth of doting love all on you alone....."

"But I do not love him." Hurriedly cutting off Lou Che's words, Yao Ying shows inexplicable panic.

"His majesty's magnanimity towards you is already something that has never happened before, don't continue to persistently go on like this anymore." As though advising, as though reproaching, Lou Che throws out such words that harbours chilling implications.

Tears uncontrollably rolls down her face once again, Yao Ying smiles, such smile that looks even more sorrowful than that of her tears, "If he truly is infinitely magnanimous towards me, why not let me go?"

"Do you think his majesty is unaware of your very doings? Me coming to your palace, could he possibly not know of this? Yet he has never once blocked us, do you know why? He is waiting, waiting till you come to understand, waiting for you to let go of your stubborn persistence. Such magnanimity like this, not every man is able to achieve."

Tears hanging on her face, she attentively thinks through his words, upon recovering herself, she harbours a thin trace of resentment, sadly asking: "For what reason are you persuading me like this for today? Is it for me? Or is it for yourself?"

Sighing, Lou Che's elegantly handsome face reveals a thin smile, "It is for you, and also for myself."

"For me?" Yao Ying softly croons, "You are doing this for yourself......your heart is not here, what are you thinking about? Where has your heart gone to?" Each word questioning, her heart feels as though it is cracking, the questions does not seem to be directed at Lou Che, but is directed towards the reality that she herself could never bring herself to face this entire time.

"Ying-er," A soft sound of gentle calling, Lou Che stands up, "Rather than

clinging onto the past, why not take a good look at reality, the person in your eyes is no longer me, it has not been for a long time." Making a sudden turn, he walks towards the outside, his walking pace showing no signs of faltering.

Frozen on the spot, Yao Ying could not even muster up the courage to call out, distractedly watching Lou Che's leaving figure, her mind in a blank state, muttering the words: "You no longer care for me? Will you no longer care for me anymore?"

The open and deserted space carries her voice into Lou Che's ears, unable to stop himself from looking back, towards the lost soul, he says: "As long as you are in the palace, I will look after you to the end." No longer looking back anymore, he resolutely leaves, no longer able to hear the gracefully mournful cries within the palace, perhaps even if he is able to hear it now, it will no longer make its way deep into his heart......

With hurried steps, he heads towards the entrance of the palace, eager to return to where his heart lies as soon as possible, he has come to understand many things, and also let go, thus feeling more relaxed than ever before.

A burst of sharp bell ringing sounds, rippling out to every little corner within the imperial palace's courtyard, Lou Che's steps comes to a halt, raising his head in slight surprise, this act of alarm is using the "imperial bell", unless in times of utmost emergencies, it is not to be used, why would it be sounding right now?

Having not yet thought of anything, quick and fragmented footsteps had already chaotically approached, numerously complicated figures of palace maids and eunuchs all looking a mess, a panicking figure walks up to Lou Che crying out: "Not good, Lady Consort Ying is going through miscarriage.....not good......"

Upon hearing this, Lou Che freezes on the spot, his brows lightly twitches, his face holds a thin layer of chill, thinking to himself, Gui Wan is only escorting her brother, there shouldn't be any problems, once again turning back to look in direction of the palace, he purses his thin lips, helplessly sighing as he heads back towards the palace......

This choice has made it impossible for him to leave the palace for seven days, that is until the shocking news reached the Prime Minister Estate.....

No matter how many hundreds of unwillingness and hate is harboured within the heart, right now it is all of no help, this is what Gui Wan is thinking as she lies in centre of the bed. Right now, her body has no strength whatsoever, even speaking is met with great difficulty, forget resisting, she helplessly watches the sweet and charming girl before her, loosen her hair ribbon, remove her earrings, fiddling around with her entire face, and even rubs on some sort of sticky substance onto her face.

After all the hassle, that sweet and charming girl looks from left to right, saying in satisfaction: "All done."

Hearing this, Ye Li approaches, attentively looking over Gui Wan, he reveals an expression of wonder, immediately lowly laughingly say: "Mo Na, bring the mirror over."

Mo Na immediately grabs a mirror and holds it in front of Gui Wan's face. Upon looking into the person in the mirror, Gui Wan is rendered speechless, the appearance of the person in the mirror has gone through a complete change, extremely ordinary, with a pale complexion, looking just like an ordinary weak and sickly woman, her heart sank, thinking to herself, if she is to leave the city looking like this, she is only afraid that no one would even think she is the Prime Minister Madam.

Taking the mirror away, Mo Na grins, asking: "How is it, my skills ain't bad right?"

If the skills wasn't used on me, I would heartily sing my praises, Gui Wan who was thinking of such reply finds that her facial muscles, could not even make out the words, and could only give up, her heart bursting into a sense of being at her wit's end.

Ye Li walks up to her, taking out a set of commoner's outer clothing she did not know when he had prepared, and covers Gui Wan's body with it. He extends his arms to lift her up, and says to Mo Na: "It is almost daybreak, let's go." Having said that, he strides out of the room.

Within the dark night, three people comes out to the rest inn's back courtyard, where four people has long been waiting aside with horses and a horse carriage. Gui Wan is unable to move in Ye Li's arms, it seems that only her eyes have been

granted freedom, unable to help herself from intently looking around, within the dark night, nothing can be clearly seen, and she only knows that there is one girl three men, two young and two slightly older.

The group of people seems to be surprised by Ye Li's action, but does not say anything, dispersing in a very orderly manner, each making their own preparations.

Ye Li carries Gui Wan into the horse carriage, his gaze fixed onto her, speaking in a soft voice: "The road ahead is going to be hard on you, just endure it for now, hm." His hand reaches out to gently stroke her face, only to find that it doesn't feel right, helplessly withdrawing his hand, he tidies Gui Wan's collar for her, before turning around and jumps out the carriage.

Just a little while later, Mo Na enters the horse carriage, her personality seems to be lively and cheerful as she brightly says: "Guess we'll be keeping each other company along the way."

Even if they take a different stance, Gui Wan cannot bring herself to hate her from deep within her heart, besides, a girl with such straightforward personality is practically rare within the Celestial Empire.

Mo Na is quite talkative, in addition to her charmingly moving appearance, her one-sided talking is also not something unexpected, so the atmosphere within the carriage will not get dull and boring. Right when Gui Wan's thoughts go through a series of fast changes, the horse carriage jolts, starting to get moving.

Silently sighing in lamentation, Gui Wan could neither cry or laugh, could it be that she really has to head to the Nu Capital?

No one answers her soundless question, only the sound of Mo Na's laughter and the carriage's wheels reminds her of the cruel reality.

"Are you tired?" At a teahouse not far from Ru Shui City, a man of dignified bearing tenderly asks his wife, although his pronunciation is rather stiff, his words are not at all short of any gentle consideration, causing many women resting within the teahouse to be envious, one after another, they all turn their heads towards the direction of the table the man is sitting at.

A high and mighty Nu man with a pale sickly woman, also accompanying them is a charming beauty, no matter how one looks at it, this group just looks rather strange, but seeing that Nu man's deeply loving expression and actions of greatly attentive consideration, really does touches the people around them, towards such an ordinary sickly wife, his deep affections is so precious.

Lightly taking a drink from the tea that was brought to her lips, Gui Wan gains a panoramic view of the behaviour and actions from those surrounding them, finding it truly laughable, could it be that the people in this world, all has such shallow perception, unable to see the true facts? Sighing to herself, she wells up with worries, how is she to solve the dilemma before her, could it be that she really is going to be forced to go to the Nu Capital?

"Here have something to eat, in a while we shall be entering Ru Shui City." A sound of reminder enters her ears, Gui Wan turns her head to face Ye Li, thinking how everything had been caused by this person's very doings, a wave of anger rises within her, unfortunately her voice had been sealed, unable to produce a single sound, and so she can only coldly glare at him.

Half amazed half enchanted, Ye Li deeply gazes at Gui Wan, nearing Gui Wan as he softly says besides her ear: "No wonder why people say you women of the Celestial Empire, be it smiling, be it frowning, all are of flirtatious expressions, even when you're fired up with anger, you still make my heart beat uncontrollably fast, from now on, don't let other men see you in such furious state."

From the corner of her eyes, she notices Mo Na reveal a smile, Gui Wan really felt embarrassed, with Ye Li saying such words, she is neither happy nor angry, within that moment, she does not even know how she should react. Upon getting along with them these past few days, she has already noticed, the personality traits of Nu people are completely different from that of the Celestial Empire people, the Nu people do things directly, bold in their expressions, even their display of affections is obviously bare. Ye Li is even more recklessly daring, so unacceptably overbearing.

Sensing Gui Wan's displeasure, Ye Li no longer dares to take another step further in expressing himself, leisurely smiling, he starts to eat. Suddenly, a rumbling sound nears them, he raises his head to look outside the teahouse.

A gust of dust rises on the main road, yellow smoke filling the skies, not long after, a team of guards quickly arrives outside the teahouse, neatly arranged in rows. The teahouse immediately turns silent, everyone looks outside in surprise, forget how strange of a matter it is to have a team of guards show up here, but to actually have two young women leading them, everyone present cannot possibly not be in wonder as they simultaneously look over.

Upon seeing the guards and the two maids Ru Qing, Ru Ming, Gui Wan's eyes shines brightly. All of a sudden, her shoulder tightens, in an instance, the tiniest amount of remaining strength left in her body is also drawn back as her body reclines, falling back into a generous embrace, Ye Li's voice sounding beside her ear: "What's wrong? Lady Wife, is your body not well again.....?" His tone filled with worries, only the closely held Gui Wan was able to clearly see the playful yet sharp warning in his expression.

With her shoulder bone locked in his hold, she could not make even the slightest of resistance, Gui Wan could only helplessly lean against Ye Li's shoulder, whilst everyone else is thinking that that pale and sickly woman's illness is acting up again, not one person noticed the inside story. Deep inside, Gui Wan grew desperate, with vague uneasiness, she recalls everything that happened since the moment of encounter in Qu Zhou, she has thoroughly fallen into a disadvantageous position, completely losing head start in the matter, although she senses that someone has been controlling the development of events from behind the scenes, right now, she has not even a single clue, despite the past few days of her paying special attention to their conversations, Ye Li has been deeply unpredictable, not even letting slip half a word of revelation.

Ru Qing, Ru Ming dismounts from their horses, and walks up to the teahouse, attentively looking around the inside, having scanned the entire place, the two people simultaneously reveals a look of disappointment, they signal the soldiers behind them to have a rest, the guards dismounts from their horses one after the other, planning to rest for a while at the teahouse.

Ru Qing walks up front, asking the owner of the teahouse: "Storeowner, these past few days, have you by chance seen a really beautiful woman come by?"

The owner responds with a smile, courteously saying: "There are many women who are really beautiful ah, half a li from here there is a widow selling tofu, she is

also very beautiful, there is also that....." Everyone within the teahouse upon hearing this, all guffaws out loud. Ye Li also could not hold it in and lowly laughs, lowering his head to look at Gui Wan, his eyes revealing arrogance and amusement.

Hearing the owner endlessly list the women he finds beautiful, Ru Qing grows impatient, Ru Ming walks up front, coldly cutting off the owner's chatter: "Who's speaking of those regular blush powders, the one we're looking for is a....." Suddenly coming to a stop, she temporarily could not describe Gui Wan's appearance in detail, unable to sum it up by saying: "In any case, one who is difficult to forget upon one look, just someone who is exceedingly beautiful."

Everyone freezes, before laughing out loud again, such words are equal to saying nothing at all.

Ru Qing waves her hand to stop Ru Ming from speaking further, lightly shaking her head twice, the two people withdraws from the teahouse. Ru Qing speaks up: "The matter should not be publicised."

Nodding her head in agreement, Ru Ming looks far into the distant, softly saying: "Just who could have taken Madam away? There's not even a single clue....."

"It is all because of our poor protection," Ru Qing displays an expression of shame, and also concern, "The Madam of the rest inn in Qu Zhou is probably the only one who seen the people that abducted our Madam, but she couldn't remember anything when she woke up. This is far too strange."

"Such loss of memory should be caused by some sort of mind manipulating martial arts or sorcery." Ru Ming quietly answers with slight teeth gnashing hatred.

"The Prime Minister Estate's spies have already gone to investigate all aspects in this case, a trail will be found in no time." As though consoling Ru Ming, Ru Qing reveals a trace of smile, but then quickly gathers it up, the two of them sadly letting out a sigh. Hearing something sound behind them, they look back to see a small group of travelling Nu merchants, one who is supporting his seriously ill wife, as they all brush past Ru Qing, Ru Ming. Ru Ming upon seeing this ill woman, unconsciously takes a step back to give way, it is in this moment of

passing by, that the man takes a deep glance at both Ru Qing, Ru Ming, and at the same time, both their hearts receives a chill, unknowingly standing fixed on the spot, following behind is a charmingly pretty girl who sweetly smiles at them, causing the two of them to find it extremely weird.

Only after seeing the few Nu people enter their horse carriage, heading off in the direction of Ru Shui City, did Ru Ming return to reality, turning her head to say to Ru Qing: "After a little rest, let us get moving again, we still need to continue searching for Madam's whereabouts."

Ru Qing lightly nods her head, looking over at the far away travelling Nu merchants, not knowing for what reason, her heart just seems to be feeling empty, as though something seems to be amiss......



It has already been a few days since she heard the liveliness of people, Gui Wan half lies within the carriage, her eyes prominently filled with dejection, her drugged body has not even the littlest strength to lift the carriage curtains, her heart filled with complete sorrow, she clearly knows, the carriage team has already left the Celestial Empire's borders, hence why they are surrounded by such peacefulness.

In her moment of deep thoughts, the carriage curtains is suddenly lifted high up, the silhouette of a tall, strong built appears before Gui Wan's eyes. Carrying a smile, Ye Li sits beside Gui Wan in the spacious carriage that is not at all crowded with two people there. Gui Wan closes her eyes, right now, she really is not in any mood to put up with him.

Seeming to have not seen her action, Ye Li extends his arms, lightly tapping at few spots on Gui Wan's body, Gui Wan opens her eyes, looking at him in puzzlement, he only smiles apologetically, and takes out a really small pill, gently pinching Gui Wan's chin as he stuffs the pill into Gui Wan's mouth.

In her mind, the memory of that time when she got poisoned is far too unforgettable, Gui Wan unconsciously retreats, but finds that there is nowhere to retreat to, she doubtfully looks at Ye Li, Ye Li acts innocent as he shrugs his shoulders, laughingly saying: "No need to be afraid, it's to relieve your body's soft tendons."

With slight urgency, Gui Wan moves her hand, because the acupoint channel has been unblocked, it has indeed recovered a lot, immediately half pulling up her body, she lifts the curtains at the side of the carriage, not caring for the aching of her entire body as she takes a look outside, and completely freezes on the spot, turns out the scenery beyond the curtains is of such unfamiliarity......

Skies of boundless yellow, difficult to make out whether it is sand or soil, the entire space expansively open and empty, half of the sunset seems to be of another side of the sky with a defeated sun red like blood, a vast array of colours rendering the entire sky, looking like a piece of great landscape painting, everything before her eyes seems to be a grand and heroic piece of writing, calligraphed by the heavens, revealing the boldly unconstrained heroic spirit of the wilderness, here, there is no graceful restraints of Jiang Nan, no dazzling glory of the Capital City, here, is a scene of wilderness without any artificiality of manmade developments.

Stunned by what she has seen, Gui Wan could not help but to softly mutter the words: "So beautiful....." Such astonishing view of nature, makes one feel infinitely small.

Speechlessly watching Gui Wan with a smile, Ye Li also sighs, the many women of the Celestial Empire who had come here before, if not crying then they would be throwing a tantrum, because the desolation of this place frightens them, only the woman before his eyes, is able to see the beauty of this place at one glance, sensing the magnificence and power of this remote place, he silently sighs in praising, as he looks at her side profile in captivation, Mo Na's skilful hands may have camouflaged her elegant face, but it cannot possibly cover up the clear

magnificence of her peerless temperament and grace.

Absently letting go of the curtain, Gui Wan feels hundreds of feelings gather in her heart, although moved by such beautiful scenery before her, the dilemma she is in also instantly shrouds her heart, the last time she saw Ru Qing, Ru Ming was outside Ru Shui City, after around twenty days of travelling, she has already far left her homeland, all on her own, coming to this unfamiliar nation, what is she to do? And how is she to return?

"Suo Ge Ta," Lightly calling back Gui Wan's empty consciousness, Ye Li says with a rare show of gentleness, "Do not worry, just give it one or two days, and your body will be able to restore its comfort, the aching pains will also disappear." Perhaps he has thought of how overbearing his actions has been, he speaks apologetically.

Looking at Ye Li, and once again looking at the wonderful scenery outside, she slightly calms herself down, Gui Wan reminds herself that she cannot panic no matter what, she must think of a way to let news of her reach the Celestial Empire, this is her most urgent priority. Thinking how, along the way, Ye Li's ingenious arrangements of all sorts and every flawlessly^[2] planned out steps taken, coupled with a great possibility of someone playing dirty tricks from behind the scenes, she definitely must not panic right now, with one wrong step, all the following steps will be wrong, right now, she cannot afford to take a single wrong step at all.

Her movements are free now, her thoughts process has also started to turn exceedingly fast, Gui Wan half leans to the side of carriage, resting to attain mental tranquillity, and at the same time, entering her deep thoughts. A melodic tone suddenly drifts past her ears, she lightly moves her body, once again glancing outside, in this open space of wilderness she sees no other human figures, puzzled, she has no idea where the singing has flowed along from, upon closer listening, the singing seems to be of the Nu Tribe's native folk song, not only is such melody and rhythm distinctively different from that of the Celestial Empire's songs, it is also sung in the Nu language, but the words "Suo Ge Ta" can be vaguely heard in the lyrics, Gui Wan is greatly surprised, although she has already heard those words numerous times, she does not know of the actual meaning behind it.

Seeing her ear to the side to listen, Ye Li lowly laughs, saying: "Are you listening to the song? This is a song that all us Nu people knows how to sing, do you like it?"

Turning her head to look at him, she originally didn't want to pay any attention, but this singing is indeed comfortable and nice to listen to, it strikes a deep chord, thinking how her acupoint channels have already been unblocked, she is able to speak again, Gui Wan asks: "It's sounds nice, what song is this?" Upon speaking, she finds that her voice sounds as light as mosquitoes, incomparable frail.

Slightly knitting his brows, Ye Li says: "To explain in your Han language, this song is an ode to the goddess, it is also a song we Nu people sing to express our love to the one we love."

A faint expression of realisation appears on Gui Wan's disguised face, Ye Li is amused upon seeing this, gently asking: "Do you want to know what the lyrics are? I'll sing it for you."

Getting slightly carried away, Gui Wan throws out the words: "No need to trouble Brother Ye Li."

Knowing that she is originally one who is as calm and indifferent as the light clouds and breeze, and also knowing that she has the intentions to purposely distant herself, Ye Li acts as though he did not hear her answer, clearing his throat, eye locked onto her, as he sings out loud in the Han language:

Suo Ge Ta, ah, Suo Ge Ta

Water-like pearl

Cloud-like jade casket

Your appearance like an angel, bright and clear

I am your loyal servant

For your beautiful smile

I am willing to give up the best thing in the world

Suo Ge Ta, ah, Suo Ge Ta

Clear is the rising sun

Cloudy is the rosy morning glow

Your appearance like a goddess, flawlessly beautiful

I am your reliable knight

For your gentle sweet words

I am willing to defend our expansive homeland

Suo Ge Ta, ah, Suo Ge Ta

The sky is the horizon

The sea is the corner

Your body of a fairy, luminously bright

I am willing to be your affectionate lover

For your loving tenderness

I am willing to give up my freedom and life

Ye Li's bright and clear voice lowly shrouds the entire carriage team, his singing gentle and pleasant, such magnet-like voice accompanied by traces of tenderness, echoes throughout this vast land of endless wilderness. Gui Wan half closes her eyes, not daring to look directly at Ye Li, hearing such moving singing, her mind grows slightly confused, as she thinks of herself, thinks of Lou Che, thinks of her prosperous homeland......

The few people outside the carriage all listens to the waves of singing, their faces revealing smiles like that of flowers, in this moment, they have all gone back to their own homeland, a surge of homesickness gives rise within their hearts. Right when everyone was deeply immersed, a hurried horse appears amongst the yellow horizon, and a loud voice travels over from afar: "Your royal highness, Prince Ye Li......Eldest Prince has come to greet you....."

The singing within the carriage comes to a sudden stop, Gui Wan also opens her eyes, what, Ye Li has an older brother? Raising her eyes to meet Ye Li's, his eyes reveals a look of complexity, in it, there harbours a sincere smile, a trace of intoxication, a trace of concern, there's also a trace of tenderness......

- [1] The phrase one cannot be helped but to be moved by or wǒ jiàn yóu lián / 我见犹怜 is actually more accurately translated to anyone cannot help but to love her upon seeing her, but my translation in the text more accurately fits in with Lou Che's viewpoint at the time, and also, I think that this translation of the phrase can cause a bit of confusion because primarily the phrase is used to refer to a woman far too beautiful that one cannot bring themselves to hold negative feelings towards her. So it is not necessarily love that Lou Che is feeling here, he just simply cannot bring himself to get angry at Yao Ying.
- [2] The original phrase used for **flawless** here is **tiān yī wú fèng /** 天衣无缝 which literally translates to **a seamless heavenly robe**.

"worldly matters cannot be forcibly pressed, only by letting go of others can one let go of oneself" — quote of the day! If only that palace maid is able to actually speak her mind and tell Yao Ying this. Honestly Yao Ying could be a somewhat of a likeable character, but we just have to always see her in such tear-filled clingy state, which causes my negative feelings towards her character to grow, thinking about it carefully though, she too is victim to a pitiful fate. From her very first appearance in chapter one, where we got the impression of her as a very prideful person who loves herself to the shattered girl now who is losing grip of everything she cherishes. Thinking about it this way, perhaps clinging onto Lou Che is also her last hope of clinging onto her past where happy memories and days of ease lies.

As for Lou Che, I swear this man constantly brings your hopes up and instantly crashes it back down, just when you are hoping for him to hurry back to Gui Wan's side and save her quicker, something else happens -_-

Full



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Scenery Of The Nu Capital

All of a sudden, the horse carriage increases in speed, Gui Wan turns her head, purposely ignoring the tenderness in Ye Li's eyes as she sets her eyes on the remote setting outside the carriage. The singing that filled the carriage has already come to a stop, but outside the carriage, the carefree singing can still be faintly heard, continuously drilling into Gui Wan's ear, bringing a distinctive tune to this desolated scenery, causing her to blur into the wilderness here, confused as to where she is.

The carriage maintained its peace, but it is not at all boring. Perhaps it is the singing from before, perhaps it is the returning to his homeland, this type of silent atmosphere is instead spiced with the slightest sense of happiness, making Ye Li incessantly savour it and not break it. He too, appears to be staring at the scenery outside the carriage, whilst his sight lingers on the person besides the carriage curtains from the corner of his eyes.

Just when she almost thought such peace would last forever, waves of voices had already penetrated its way through into the carriage. Gui Wan overlooks everything from the little carriage window, upon seeing the city, she could not help but to be filled with heartfelt praises, so this is the Nu Capital! After staring for a long time, did she finally realise the mystery of this city. The horse carriage hurriedly rushes forward in arrival, only seeing a scene of the Gobi Desert in

front, from the outside view, it is but a yellow coloured Gobi barrel, upon closer approach, does one find that it is actually bubbling with the liveliness of people, and only then does one realise it is a natural formed city. Only by looking from beyond the city gates, is one able to see the remarkably vibrant atmosphere inside, a heavily populated city.

"This is my homeland, the Nu Capital, what do you think, how does it compare to the Capital City?" Ye Li suddenly speaks up, questioning her.

Her face that had been fixed up by Mo Na's hands could only reveal a slight expression, Gui Wan indifferently says with a smile: "A natural fortress, is indeed different from the usual," After a little pause, does she slowly give her answer, "But compared to the long established air of royalty the Capital City holds, four words, level falls far short."

Heartily laughing aloud upon hearing this, Ye Li is not at all angered, "You're right, it is indeed so, the Capital City's air of royalty, I too, have long yearned for." Within his accented Han language, the four words "have long yearned for" is spoken with an aggravated tone, causing Gui Wan to lightly frown upon hearing this.

Just when Ye Li's words of deeper meaning were spoken, the horse carriage suddenly stops, outside the carriage, someone loudly calls out: "Your highness, Eldest Prince has long been waiting up ahead."

"I have made Brother wait too long." Ye Li lowly laughs as he answers, in the moment he throws his body forward, he lifts the curtains and leaves the carriage. It is in this moment when the curtain was lifted, that Gui Wan attentively looks into the outside environment, ten steps away, a team of small troop awaits, a man stands in the middle, his clothing distinctively differs from the rest, he must be the Nu Tribe's Eldest Prince, sweeping her eyes across, Gui Wan is extremely disappointed, this person is tall with a strong built, but has a look of insolence, such appearance is clearly the epitome of a barbarous man, compared to Ye Li's dignified demeanour, again, using those same four words, level falls far short, she cannot believe these two people are actually brothers.

Ye Li steps off the carriage, he turns and looks into Gui Wan's eyes, extending his hand in offer of support as she gets off the carriage. Gui Wan obliquely

shrinks back, holding onto the carriage's armrest, her foot stepping on the ground, upon landing, her body felt light, unable to summon any strength, her body shakes, and actually could not stand properly, elbow sensing warmth, Ye Li is already holding onto her, sighing as he says: "Don't force yourself, your body has not yet recovered."

She really wanted to throw off his hand, unfortunately her body just have no strength whatsoever, Gui Wan bitterly laughs at herself as she can only let him link onto her.

"Ye Li, who is this woman?" The Eldest Prince who is shrouded in barbarous air calls out in surprise, completely unable to understand Ye Li's actions. This haughty younger brother of his, when did he have such expressions of tenderness? Carefully inspecting this very frail looking woman, although her figure is graceful, but her looks are average, not even half as good as Mo Na.

Noticing Eldest Prince's puzzlement, Ye Li does not explain, only greeting: "[Older] Brother, I'm back. This....." Turning to look at Gui Wan, he speaks again, "This is the person in my painting, I have brought her back."

She's the person in the painting? Eldest Prince reveals a look of doubt as he sweeps a glance across Gui Wan, he was originally very interested in Ye Li's extremely treasured painting, but now that he sees the real person, his interest completely disappears, not only does she have not even half a point of beauty, she is also sickly, not at all meeting his expectations of beauties.

Not caring anymore, Eldest Prince walks up to him, patting Ye Li's shoulder as he laughingly says: "Good to have you back, Royal Father is waiting for you, and wants to have a good to chat with you."

Having almost shattered her eardrums due to the Eldest Prince's thunderous laughing, Gui Wan turns her head, ever since she stepped off the carriage, they have all been speaking in the Nu language, she cannot even understand half a word they say, and only knows that that Eldest Prince's eyes are presumptuous, looking over her two times, his eyes cold, and even carries disdain, laughing to herself inside, Gui Wan softly sighs, to actually make a show of his feelings so clearly, this person really is a barbarous man.

Signalling Mo Na over, tenderly handing Gui Wan over to her, he quietly gives

an order before both Ye Li and Eldest Prince enters the city side by side, the two of them talking and laughing, expressions cheerful, familial affections overflowing from their words.

Mo Na supports Gui Wan as the two of them slowly follow behind, by widening her distance from Ye Li, only then could Gui Wan have the chance to carefully inspect her surroundings, looking all around the place, the setting of this foreign land truly is vastly different from that of the Celestial Empire, after a month of commuting, she has long been in a tired state, now she can heartily enjoy herself, her mood lightens up, temporarily letting go of all her troubles, wholeheartedly touring this place.

Mo Na has spent an entire month taking care of Gui Wan by her side, to see her so relaxed right now, she is also infected by the pleasure, pointing out the local culture and customs as they walk.

The group quickly arrives in the middle of the city, Gui Wan watches as Ye Li greets people along the way, everyone's faces carries a look of happiness as they greet the two princes, inevitably she was slightly surprised, in the Celestial Empire, the common people practically have no chance of getting to know the imperial family, but here, it seems that everyone knows the princes, after a little pondering, did she understand, this is the Nu Tribe's distinctive attribute, it is also where this tribe's unity lies, the vitality of such young ethnic community seems to be completely shining through in this moment, the Celestial Empire on the other hand, is actually far less than the Nu Tribe in this aspect.

Mo Na gently pulls Gui Wan, signally to sit in the horse carriage prepared at the city gates, Gui Wan reveals a bitter look, she had just gotten off the carriage and she has to get on another one again? Giving Mo Na a slightly puzzled look.

Lightly laughing out loud, Mo Na says: "There is still quite a bit of distance from here to the palace, his highness says your body is not well, cannot ride a horse, that's why a horse carriage was prepared."

Unable to refuse, under a state of helplessness, she once again sits in the horse carriage with Mo Na. Ye Li and Eldest Prince mounts a horse, riding at the front in lead, the entire group heading into the centre of the Nu Capital.

Along the way, as if the warm welcome was not enough, fresh flowers are

flying in from the sides, thrown towards the pair of princes in the middle, children offering flowers one after another, there are also young ladies publicly ogling at them, even Gui Wan could feel the passion of this nation, unable to help but to reveal a smile, this type of solid and sincere support, in the Celestial Empire is practically an inconceivable phenomenon.

Gui Wan was in the midst of savouring the distinctiveness of this nation, when within a blink of an eye, the palace hall was already in sight.

Compared the Celestial Empire's glamorous imperial palace, the palace here will inevitably appear shabby, but as compared to the Celestial Empire's completely different structure and style, it still gives Gui Wan a pleasant surprise. In a setup like this, escaping from this place seems to be slightly easier than she had expected.

Gui Wan wordlessly follows Mo Na into the palace despite being in a situation of being pushed around. Ye Li did not show up again after entering the palace, it seems that he does not have the leisurely time to come over, she also felt so much more at ease with this. Upon entering a room prepared by Mo Na, she was so tired after taking a bath that she fell asleep, in a blur, she seems to have felt Mo Na play out her "skilful hands" on her face again.

Her awareness level finally fades out as she has the most peaceful sleep within a month.

No dreams, no fear, she opens her eyes, the sunlight almost touching her, blinking her eyes in discomfort, she finally realises she is lying in an unfamiliar setting, indifferently smiling, Gui Wan sits up, the sense of pain from the drugs has mostly disappeared from her body, and so she could not help but to be in a great mood, her eyes circles around, to find that she is all alone in the room, she fumbles out of bed.

Sitting at the edge of the bed, she looks down to see a snow white sheep wool rug laid out on the ground, Gui Wan's barefoot lands on the floor, feeling that the wool is perfectly tailored, making one feel as though they are standing on a cloud. Standing up, she carefully inspects the room, although this place is far less elegant when compared to her bedroom in the Prime Minister Estate, it is not short of natural comfort, she can see that the one who arranged this room is

someone with skilful hands, could it be the work of Mo Na? Sighing at her own blind and disorderly thinking, Gui Wan turns around and heads towards the windows.



This appears to be the second floor, the window is really big and low, one can practically stick the majority of their body out of it, she half leans on the window sill, bending her body to look down, gaining a panoramic view of a small half of the palace, she quietly observes the view before her eyes, a faint smile harbouring obscurity.

Suddenly a surprised cry sounds below her, she looks over attentively, below is someone with a refined appearance, a face full of shock looking towards her, mouth wide open, but emits no sound, not long after, a small group of people gathers below the window, all who are pointing around, incessantly gibbering, speaking words of the Nu language that Gui Wan has no understanding of, sounds of several sighing were also mixed amongst them.

The clamouring enters her ears, Gui Wan frowns, turning to leave the window, only after a while, did the noisiness outside restore its peace, she was just about to get up, going back to the window to observe the situation, when a burst of knocks sounds.

Gui Wan's two words of "please enter" had yet to leave her lips, when the doors were already opened, Ye Li grins as he enters the room, a trace of praising and amazement seeming to have flashed by his eyes, "Suo Ge Ta, did you hear the singing of the birds this early morning?"

No longer bothering to show pointless struggles towards this addressment "Suo Ge Ta", Gui Wan gentle rope in her hair, indifferently saying: "Scent of flowers lingers, singing of birds moving, this is indeed a great place that has the spirit to produce outstanding figures."

"Do you like this place then?" He asks tentatively.

"Beautiful flowers are planted in the ground, the water is of course great, but are you able to move flowers into to water as companions for the fishes?" Smiling gracefully, she does not answer but asks back.

"That is far too unfair for the little fish, it clearly adores this flower so much." Approaching a little, Ye Li's face appears dejected and slightly cold, "Even if the flower is unwilling, I will still move it to the water to try."

Knowing this person's arrogant personality, speaking further has no benefits, Gui Wan lightly shrugs, declining to comment, the two of them wordless.

Ye Li arranges his expression, thinking that she is already in the Nu Capital, there is a lot time to change everything from now on, his voice also turns a few points gentler: "You've already been sleeping for an entire day and night, the palace has a celebration banquet tonight, why don't you also come along?"

Originally wanting to reject him, but thinking of Ye Li's whimsical, one sided personality, words of refusal can only remain sitting in her mouth, Gui Wan submissively nods, raising her head to ask: "What about my things, can you give them back to me now?" All of her belongings has been taken from her, even the clothing she is wearing right now have changed into the Nu's outfit, she is rather unaccustomed to this.

Eyes circling around her body, Ye Li voice sounds slightly deep: "At the banquet, just wear a Nu outfit. Your things, I will return to you later."

Softly sounding a cold laugh, Gui Wan makes no statement, casually standing up, she does not care about Ye Li, and looks outside the window, wanting an even bigger sky to be reflected in her eyes.

Standing behind her, Ye Li stands still, unable to turn around, nor is he able to look away, softly saying: "My subjects will definitely be impressed by you, they are bound to be captivated by you," Suddenly recalling the burst of chattering

within the palace just before, he changes his words, "Perhaps there are already those that have been impressed by you....."

His words, drifts past Gui Wan's ears, she leisurely turns her head back, as though smiling but not smiling, sweetly saying: "All that I want, is not that complicated, what I want, is perhaps just the heart of one person, and also a view of the blue sky." One fine finger distant in one stroke, pointing to the skies, such action flows freely, carrying the form of soul capturing beauty.

Ye Li uncontrollably looks out the window to where that finger points, a view of light blue reflected in his eyes, yet what he feels is his heart beating painfully fast, gloomily looking at the person before him, his consciousness blurs in this moment, his mouth blurting out a soft calling: "Suo Ge Ta?"

No one answers, emptiness falls upon the room with silence and desolation.

Night time very quickly arrives, the palace is already lit with fire, with waves after waves of singing, the atmosphere is extremely lively. Gui Wan sits inside the room, simply leaving Mo Na to doll her up, after a while, Mo Na finally reveals a look of satisfaction, marvelling: "This is definitely my lifetime's most satisfying masterpiece."

Gui Wan laughingly follows on: "This is definitely my lifetime's most helpless trip." Glancing at Mo Na's look of difficulty, she looks outside the door, from henceforth, she alone needs to face changes, face dilemmas, not to mention leave this place that she does not belong to, no matter how extraordinarily beautiful it is......



They say Nu people specialises in singing and dancing, personally experiencing it today, Gui Wan still feels incessant amazement. Only after stepping out of the palace halls, did she see the palace's lawn lit with bonfires everywhere, every bonfire is surrounded by crowds of people singing and dancing, regardless of gender. Her eyes circle around the place, spotting the most populated bonfire and also the liveliest, guessing that is where the royal family is, she slowly makes her way over.

Ye Li had already seen Gui Wan since the very moment she stepped out the palace, although he is drinking wine, joyously chatting away, his eyes has always been silently keeping watch of her actions, never once leaving her, deep down, he is wary, he seems to be increasingly unable to let go of her, clearly aware she is a married woman, plus her husband as the Celestial Empire's Grand Secretary, is set on bringing her back, such actions that originally had political objectives has also been forgotten due to his increasingly drunk state, what's more fatal is, he has already lost his mind because of her, yet she is not affected in the slightest bit, deep in his heart, he cannot help but to harbour feelings of jealousy and anger towards her husband, could it be that the Celestial Empire's men are truly this charming?

Sitting in the middle, next the bonfire, is the King of the Nu Tribe, who sees Ye Li's abnormal behaviour, he follows the direction in which he looking at, his half blind eyes seems to have caught on within a flash, hidden within the firelight in this dark night, he heartily says laughingly: "Ye Li, is this the treasure you had brought back from the Celestial Empire?"

"It is, Royal Father." Ye Li downs a mouthful of wine, the pungent taste rushes down his throat, yet he is completely unfeeling of it.

"Indeed a rarely seen beauty," He praises out loud in pleasure, the old Nu King appears as lively as ever, suddenly a chill flashes in his eyes, "But it is still not enough to exchange for our great cause."

The cold and stern voice gives Ye Li a sudden shock, looking at his father's face, he is unable to answer, downing another big mouthful, a slightly bitter taste is swallowed down into his belly.

The flames of the bonfire is unable to cover the old Nu King's voice, all those around them quietens down, following the Nu King's eyes as they watch Gui Wan slowly walk up, all falling into a moment of breathlessness, in such wild land, when could they ever have seen such exquisite beauty, in this moment of absolute disbelief, Gui Wan had already arrived at the bonfire.

The old Nu King is also full of admiration towards her easiness and calm, laughingly greeting: "Lady's elegant demeanour surpasses and is not at all less than the pearls of the grasslands."

Gui Wan is not surprised by Nu people speaking Han, the Nu Tribe has been ruled by the Celestial Empire for almost two hundred years, the Nu people are all able to speak the Han, although under the revolt of the last Nu king, it is already a stand-alone nation separate from the Celestial Empire, Han language remains as one of the spoken languages in the Nu Tribe. Faintly smiling as she bows, paying a simple show of courtesy, expressing her respect towards the Nu King, Gui Wan gracefully delivers the words: "Nu King's heroism is also no less than the eagles of the grasslands." (Eagles are symbolic of strength and heroism in Chinese culture)

Unable to hold back his hearty laughter, the old Nu King's eyes holds even more appreciation: "As elegant as the clouds, as clean as white snow, as cool as the winds, no wonder why my son is intoxicated by you lady, if I were twenty years younger, I too would definitely not let you go."

Already accustomed to the Nu people's boldly unconstrained attitude of enthusiasm, Gui Wan smiles, seeing that the old Nu King's smile did not reach his eyes, she quietly waits for him to continue.

"Lady is a golden branch of the Celestial Empire, to have come to the Nu Capital, suffering along the bumpy road, makes me feel guilty, but I cannot possibly be ungrateful of you for this."

Aware that he words holds a deeper meaning, Gui Wan takes a seat on a bench that the servants had just brought over, "Nu King is too polite, although I have received such 'special care' along the way, to be able to enjoy the scenery here, I too feel very honoured."

"I am not speaking out of politeness, my reason for gratitude towards lady, is because lady's arrival at our Nu Tribe has brought upon us a chance of survival."

Silent for a moment, Gui Wan smiles, "I don't remember doing anything for the Nu Tribe."

"You do not need to do anything, your very existence has already contributed to the Nu Tribe." The old Nu King spoke in such manner, his voice resonant, his face unruly.

Because she is unable to make out the meaning behind his words, Gui Wan already carried a slight look of indignant, settling down, her face is lit with her usual indifferent smile like that of a cloud, tentatively asking: "I would appreciate further details."

"I have already sent a letter to lady's family, I believe lady's family has already prepared generous gifts, departing from the Capital City to come get you."

Gui Wan freezes, amongst hundreds and thousands of thoughts, she would never have thought to be able to hear the old Nu King personally speak of her return, giving rise to a feeling of contempt towards him, to use this sort of behaviour no different from abduction for ransom, how is this anything like the behaviour of a king of a country? At the same time, she is thrown into confusion, exactly what are they asking for in exchange, to actually abduct her thousands of li away to the Nu Capital?

Only Ye Li continues to bitterly smile, he has brought her here out of his own selfishness, his original feelings that were only of adoration seems to have already grown intense, burning him to extreme discomfort, a wave of heat swarms in his stomach, he suddenly bolts up, not caring for everyone's look of surprise, he grabs onto Gui Wan's wrist, towards the old Nu King, he announces

with complete resolution^[1]: "Royal Father, I do not agree."

All sorts of doubtful and weird gazes were casted upon him, Ye Li ignores them, his deep voice filled with determination: "Even if it is between a fish and a bear's paw, I still want it." The power of such sharpness like a knife, the air of such arrogance like a rainbow.

Aside from the few exceptions, a great number of people reveals puzzlement, the old Nu King says nothing, his eyes nailed onto him, his unclear eyes shows no joy nor anger.

Ye Li turns his head, gazing at Gui Wan, even if it is only a little, a little show of emotions will be good, a little show of encourage will also be good, he is willing to carry all the burden for her.

Within a moment of daze, a split second of hesitation, she throws off his hand, not sparing a look at Ye Li's expression, Gui Wan says to the old Nu King: "I hereby tour this scenery, waiting for my family to arrive, Nu King and everyone's warm hospitality, I shall bear in mind, and will certainly return."

"No," Ye Li suddenly speaks up, attracting her eyes to him, "No, I will not allow you to leave....."

A meaningful faint smile floats to the surface of her lips, she faces him with a chilling gaze, "My sky is not here." Throwing out a sentence of puzzling words, she no longer bothers with everyone there, turning around and leaves, without the slightest hesitation nor pause.

In the Capital City, the warmth of summer has already unfolded step by step, only in the courtyard of the Prime Minister Estate, does it seem like the chilliness of late spring still remains.

A figure dashes into the inner courtyard in flying manner, like a shadow flashing by, a spear obstructs the crescent doorway, the guard's neither cold nor warm voice sounds extremely mechanical: "Halt at the inner courtyard, not free to enter."

The person incessantly gasps for air, his face already flushed red, speaking disjointedly: "There.....there's news of Madam."

The always calm guard reveals a look of pleasant surprise upon hearing this, thinking to himself, the arrival of Madam's news, should also end the Prime Minister Estate's days of suffering, after little hesitation, he withdraws the spear, unable to help but blurt out the question: "Is it really news of Madam?"

Desperately panting for air, the person can only frantically nod his head.

"Quickly go in." The guard reveals a rare smile, immediately giving entry.

The person suddenly summons up all his energy, once again starting to run inside, loudly crying out: "There.....there's news of Madam."

The summer atmosphere at once flies into the Prime Minister Estate courtyard, the estate livening up, this past month, the dead silence caused by Prime Minister Lou's depression and rage has been broken by this shocking news that came so suddenly......

A leisurely breeze passes through the study room in the Prime Minister Estate's inner courtyard, spurring the glass bell hung on the eaves to emit a clear ringing sound, the lingering charm sways leisurely, whilst a scene of still silence falls upon the room, the emptiness of the glass bell leaving the room filled with a refreshing sigh.

Dressed in luxurious clothing, an elegant and handsome looking man sits in front of the desk, his eyes conceals coldness as he attentively looks at the letter on the table, tightly pursed lips adding a bit of chilliness to his warm and gentle face, right hand clenching onto a string of black pearl earrings, although not a word is spoken, his entire being is shrouded in an air of breath-taking dignity.

The man who delivered the letter stands beside the desk, despite the beads of sweat lining his forehead, he actually feels a burst of chills, not daring to make a move to wipe his sweat, only afraid that the slightest movement would cause him harm due to the cold imposing air surrounding the young prime minister sitting behind the desk.

Lou Che tightly clenches his fist with the earring in hold, a slight coolness can be felt within his hand, making its way straight into his heart, and even pulls through his deepest layers of thoughts..... The first time he had seen her wear this earring was at the end of the year, such unique enchantment like some sort of luminous shine flowing colourfully, leaving all who have seen her with an unforgettable memory, right now the earring has already returned, yet she is still separated by thousands of li away, thinking up to this point, the strength in his hand unconsciously increases, once again glancing over the letter on the table, he lightly sounds a cold scoff, a monstrous rage taking over his heart.



The Nu Tribe wants to use Gui Wan in exchange for warhorses, looks like the disaster in the Nu truly has already reached an extremely severe state, his hand reaches out, tearing the paper into shreds, Lou Che stands up, slowly walking up to the windowsill, gazing out the window into a sea of emerald green, hundreds of mixed feelings gathers in his chest, difficult to dispel.

Since when did the heat of summer already arrive, could it be he has forgotten the times? Only that day he was stopped outside Qu Zhou City seems to have remained in his mind, unable to recall anything after their goodbyes, to actually lose all news of her just like that, how did he feel when he first heard she had disappeared, was it anger? Was it fear? Was it pain? He is unable to tell exactly how he was feeling, only knowing, that even if he has to dig out the entire Qu Zhou, he must definitely find her.

Yet she actually disappears just like that, even when with half of the Celestial Empire heavily guarded, they still couldn't find any traces of her. This past month, he had no appetite to eat, unable to get a good night sleep, even with Consort Ying's miscarriage, and the huge matter of students denouncing the imperial government, wilfully criticising the Emperor favouring his consort, he

could not bring himself to focus on handling such matters, as though stuck in a boundless dimension, what he lost is half his soul.

The garden without her figure, his ears void of her soft laughter; her grace, her smarts, her smiles, simply vanishinh into thin air, right after he had already gotten used to and had even become intoxicated, everything suddenly disappears from his world.

Such bitter feeling that cannot possibly get any more bitter than this, has been carved into his bones and engraved in his heart^[2], further allowing him to suffer the feeling of greatly worrying about the outcome. Such feeling, should be able to be referred to as love, right? Lou Che speechlessly smiles bitterly, when they were newlyweds, he had once made it clear to her, promising not to fall in love with one another, the two of them seem to have drawn out a circle, called "not to fall in love", but unknowingly, he wandered out of the circle, his feet stuck deep in the mud, yet she, seems to still be uncertainly lingering inside the circle......

A burst of wild laughter suddenly resonates within the room, standing at the side with both legs almost completely numb, the messenger who reported the letter receives a sudden shock, widening his eyes, carrying a look of disbelief as he staress at Lou Che, his heart filled with dread.

Lou Che crazily laughs out loud, pouring out an entire month's worth of depression, now that he has found out where Gui Wan is, he will not have even a moment of hesitation, remembering the Nu's request of settlement, their search for the beauty in the painting, scene after scene pieced together, his eyes flashes with a chill, his entire chest firing up, to actually take his, Lou Che's wife, to make an exchange, he shall definitely have the Nu pay a painful lesson.

"Lord.....Lord Prime Minister....." Trembling as he softly calls out, the messenger unable to bear such oppressive atmosphere, is forced to speak out.

"Lou Yu, inform the guards of the estate to get ready, in two hours' time, I shall be setting out to the Nu Capital, immediately go to the military division in ask for a few warhorses."

"Lord Prime Minister.....could it be you're going to meet their requirements? But.....in this case....." "To actually take Gui Wan for a condition of exchange, you think I would let them off so easily?" Lou Che's clear and light voice carries a trace of laughter, dispersing into the air, twisting into an insidious and vicious air of severity. The messenger's heart thumps, even though he clearly knows the one he wants to deal with is not himself, the hidden cold meaning in his words still manages to extract the cold sweat out of him.

Relentlessly swallowing down a mouthful of saliva, he gently forces out the words: "But, if you don't agree, wouldn't Madam be in danger....."

Lou Che's resonantly cold laughter does not diminish, as though mocking the person's lack of intelligence: "The lovable thing about politics, is that in this world, there is no equivalent pay, sometimes it is possible to lose both money and life also."

Not daring to ask anymore, as the imposing air leaves him shaken, bending to a bow, he slowly withdraws from the study room, the oppressive feeling immediately disappears, and he secretly lets out a sigh of relief, silently looking through the crack of the door, it is clearly the elegantly handsome face like that of the spring breeze, yet why is there this sense like that of being in an ice cold environment? Just now, such pressure like having a knife held against him, seemed like an illusory image, the only real proof of its happening is the cold sweat lining his forehead, not daring to think any further, he closes the doors, quickly leaving the place.

Now free of any disturbance, Lou Che holds up the pearl earrings, looking very attentively at it, deeply thinking without a word, a while after, he walks up to the desk, placing down the earrings, he lifts the idle brush on the table, planning to leave a letter for the Emperor, and have someone immediately sending it into the palace, thinking for a moment, he was hesitating how to word it, but finds that in a moment unconsciousness, he had already written a few words on the paper, after getting a clear look of the written words, he could not help but reveal a trace of smile like the spring breeze, four words impressively written on the paper:

My wife Gui Wan

Sitting on the wool rug barefooted, Gui Wan fiddles with various ornaments before her, her face of deep calm showing a trace of cunningness that is difficult to catch onto.

Walking into the room, Mo Na was incessantly surprised: "What are you doing? Madam." Ever since the day of the banquet, the Nu King strictly ordered, everyone must know that this woman of the Celestial Empire is a distinguished guest, not one person should neglect this.

Gui Wan raises her head, smiling beautifully, captivatingly, reflecting the long lost joy in her, "Thinking about how to spend the next few days."

"Madam, why not go wandering around the Nu Capital, I believe everyone within the entire city must be scrambling to catch a glimpse of your elegance." Mo Na laughingly says, these past few days, Gui Wan has practically been pestering her in asking for all that is happening within the Nu Capital, not even sparing the minor details, with the look of extreme interest towards the Nu Capital.

Not giving an immediate answer, Gui Wan acts as though she is thinking as she picks up the things around her, a twinkling of faint light catches Mo Na's attention, she could not help but to stare curiously at the thing in Gui Wan's hand, all of those are the accessories that had originally been removed from Gui Wan's body, but looking at it now, how could the structure look slightly different?

Gui Wan notices her wonder, but does not stop her, leaving her to get a good look, until Mo Na took hold of it, did she feel she is being overly sensitive, this is clearly an accessory from back then, there is no difference at all. Looking away, she looks towards Gui Wan again.

Gui Wan still carries that faint smile, sweetly saying: "Since there is nothing to do, then let us go wander around the Nu Capital." Having said that, she stands up, her face filled with anticipation.

Seeing her in such a happy mood, Mo Na hastily stands up, under Gui Wan's suggestion, the two of them leaves the room in male getup, with the accompany of Mo Na, they smoothly leave the palace.

A little after leaving the palace gates, they follow a small and sparsely

populated trail, Mo Na excitedly explains to Gui Wan about some of the unique things in the Nu Tribe, but finds that Gui Wan seems a little distracted, she diverts the topic, asking: "Is it not as beautiful as your homeland here? Why are you not happy?"

"The Celestial Empire and this place each has its own strengths, I really like it," Within her indifferent smile, there reveals desolation, Gui Wan turns her head, gently asking, "But I have been brought here as a tradable item.....how am I to possibly treat this place as my own homeland?"

Hearing this, Mo Na reveals a look of shame, the Nu people have always been militant, but because of the natural disaster that occurred this time, they have suffered the loss of a large number of warhorses. The decline in military strength, caused the Nu Tribe to face a serious shortage of fighting force in face of foreign enemies, that is why they need one woman to make an exchange for warhorses, and because of Prince Ye Li's selfish reasons, they have actually abducted this woman to the Nu territory, even wanting to make her his, such acts does indeed appear somewhat despicable.

Wanting to say a word of apology, she looks back, only to meet Gui Wan's smiling face like that of blossoming spring flowers, in a moment of hesitation, she had just wanted to ask for the reason, when her hand suddenly receives a gentle prick, the words in her mouth turns into a soft sound, and her body had already collapsed, she forcefully grips onto her consciousness, but senses her willpower rapidly blur out.

Gui Wan crouches down, looking into her almost closed eyes, she softly says: "This type of drug is not only exclusive to the Nu Tribe, it is also available in my homeland, originally I have only kept it by my side for self-defence, didn't think I would be using it on you, you take a good rest, no matter what, you do not need to apologise to me, with this, I guess we're even now."

A gracefully pretty voice accompanies Mo Na's consciousness as she gradually sinks deep into darkness.....

Standing up, once again checking all the accessories she has on her, Gui Wan remains on the same spot for a while, although she has found out about all situations within the Nu Tribe these past few days, and even made a detailed

plan, she still needs to think it through carefully, by taking every step into great consideration, only then can she truly leave this place.

Raising her head towards the skies, Gui Wan reveals a smile of indifference, gently throwing back her sleeves, she clearly works out the directions, turning around and leaves.

- [1] The original term used to say **complete resolution** is **zhǎn ding jié tiě /** 斩 钉截铁, this literally translates to **chop nail, section iron** which refers to **making** a **clear cut decision**.
- [2] To carve into one's bones and engrave on one's heart or kè gǔ míng xīn / 刻骨铭心 is used to express an unforgettable heartfelt feeling or memory.

After reading this chapter, I really cannot understand how the Nu people are able to hold themselves so high up despite the underhanded means they take to, especially when the Nu King told Gui Wan of her use to them, so pridefully too ugh!

On the other hand, Lou Che finally realises and admits to his love for Gui Wan, the entire estate suffering thanks to her disappearance haha. I guess he suffered quite a bit, not that it's enough to make up for the suffering Gui Wan has to put up with. And as much as I'd love to see him actually do something to prove himself somewhat worthy of her, I'm much happier to see Gui Wan take action herself, for better or for worse we will have to see for ourselves......

Oh! And for those missing our general...16...chapter 16! Just two more chapters now lol

Full



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Night Robbery

"Gui Wan, you must remember, worldly matters are like a game of chess, you must never take a step of deviation....." A face of gorgeous beauty nears Gui Wan's face, such face is actually bathed in bright clear tears, within misery there actually carries perseverance.

A little hand reaches out, but is still unable to reach the person's face no matter how hard it tries to stretch out, tears, misery, gorgeous beauty, all seeming to blur together, Gui Wan immediately panics, murmuring: "Mother, mother......what's wrong?" Why is her usually carefree and frank mother exposing such sorrowful expression?

".....no matter how beautiful one's face is, all will become the bones of a beauty one day, in this world, there is nothing that lasts forever, feelings are even more so as temporary as fireworks. Never easily trust others from now on....."

"Mother, don't cry anymore." The little hand finally touches her mother's face, gently wiping away the burning tears, Gui Wan smiles in a comforting manner, "I will definitely not easily trust others from now on, mother, please don't cry anymore now."

The beautiful woman reveals a very faint smile, holding up Gui Wan's little hand as she walks forward, her lips gently reciting: "What harm is there in getting drunk for one's lord; Only afraid when sobered up, the heartbreak that follows^[1]......Gui Wan, I have given you near-perfect beauty that all the women in the world desires, but I have taught you to be indifferent to feelings since young, do you understand my tough love?"

"As long as I don't fall in love, I will not be pained, as long as I am indifferent to feelings, I will not be harmed......" Voice gradually fading out, as though separated by a veil of mist, the image grows increasingly obscure.

Mother.....don't be sad anymore.....

"Mo—" A shrill voice pierces through the air, abruptly awakening from the darkness, Gui Wan desperately gasps for air, frosty chill filling her heart, irregularly beating, panicking to point that cannot be suppressed, her back oozing in sweat, she takes a deep deep breath, adjusting her mentality. Raising her head, an affectionately old face expands before her eyes.

"Lady, what's wrong?" The old woman leans over, her wrinkly face showing a sense of protective love, "Did you have a nightmare?"

Lax eyes regaining consciousness, Gui Wan reveals a comforting smile of indifference, softly saying: "It's nothing." Upon speaking, she finds that her voice is actually hoarse, she turns her head in observation of her surroundings, the sounds of carriage wheels enters her ears, looking down, there are still three other people lying down within the horse carriage, all of different postures, looking as though they have not been startled awake.

Discreetly letting out a deep sigh of relief, Gui Wan gently leans against the carriage walls, restoring her calm, the happenings of the day flashing before her eyes. After drugging Mo Na and escaping, in accordance of several days of inquiring, she alone picks out a less used path in order to head down to the western city of the Nu Capital, there, is an area populated by a mix of Nu and

Celestial Empire people, and is also the place that she is most likely to stay hidden in. Changing into commoner's clothing, covering her face with fabric, and even then, she still felt unsafe, until she ran into this group of travelling merchants and performance troupe, only by using a silver ribbon could she bribe the leader of the performance troupe, allowing her to travel along with them. Faintly smiling, she unconsciously reaches out to stroke the cuff of her sleeves, her silver ribbon was made with Lou Che's request to a skilled craftsmen who weaved wires of white gold with wild silk yarn, regardless of its intrinsic value, there is also only seven of them in this world.

No matter how valuable the ribbon is, it cannot be more valuable than one's own safety, right now, she needs to do whatever it takes to get back to the Celestial Empire......

Gently waving the cuffs of her sleeve, her thoughts seems to be growing chaotic again, the dream from just now once again binding her heart, how long has it been.....she has never dreamt of this again for a long time, why would it suddenly come back to her again? Anguish and depression faintly, harshly, spreading out from within her heart, could it be because she is facing a dangerous situation, thus causing her to recall the past?

Never trust anyone.....in this world, you can only rely on yourself......

Her mother's words pounds into her eardrums over and over again, causing her pain like that of needles pricking into her, such torturous pain spreads out from the bottom of her heart, her eyes absently staring off into one spot, Gui Wan bitterly laughs, mother, to never trust anyone, how lonely that makes me ah.....

Exactly where is my sky?

"Lady, could you possibly be thinking of your family?" The old woman's voice suddenly sounds again, cutting off Gui Wan's rather gloomy thoughts.

"Yeah, recalled some things from the past." Gui Wan very faintly smiles, despite that it cannot be clearly seen in the darkness, but the airy nonchalance in her tone, seems rather unreal.

"Lady, wait till it's almost daybreak, and we'll be reaching the border region between the Celestial Empire and Nu Tribe, another two days of travelling after that, and we shall arrive at the Celestial Empire's city borders, and then you can return home....." The old woman is filled with high hopes, her deliberately lowered voice unable to conceal her great excitement.

"Lady, did you by chance meet with some sort of troubles?" Seeing Gui Wan say nothing, the old woman converses on her own, "If met with troubles, don't get angered, if matters cannot be solved, then just rely on your heart to solve it. Sometimes, the conflict between reason and emotions, requires looking into what your heart says....."

"Heart....." She sounds a soft murmur like a sneer, wanting to refute her words, yet says nothing, suddenly, she recalls how a certain man once said to her, he will satisfy all her wants, her memories of that moment appears so vividly before her eyes, and she instantly slips in surprise.

"Lady, how did you get all the way here?" The old woman seems to be struggling to sleep, pestering Gui Wan as she mutters on nonstop, "How could you travel all alone, you must know, when women go out, they cannot do without a man ah....."

"The road here was indeed not very safe," This voice suddenly sounds from below, only when she looked down, did she find, the three sleeping figures within the carriage had already woken up, and have heard the conversation between Gui Wan and the old woman, all of them sits up. Amongst them, a girl in yellow clothing says: "If not for special circumstances, who would go out all on their own?"

Seeing the girl's glance directed towards herself, Gui Wan backs up into the dark a little.

The women inside the carriage can no longer go back to sleep, sitting together as they chat away, originally somewhat of a lonely room suddenly filled with support.

Within the sound of the women chattering, that girl in yellow suddenly turns to Gui Wan, asking: "What about you?"

Having yet to completely react, Gui Wan shows a face of loss, saying: "What?"

"We were asking you, why are you travelling all alone?"

After a moment of silence, she naturally couldn't tell them the actual truth, Gui Wan gracefully answers: "I didn't want to become other people's burden, so I came out on my own."

Seeing the three people's puzzled expression, with only the old granny remaining thoughtfully in silence, Gui Wan closes her eyes, no longer saying anything more.

Why did she escape on her own, the reason is actually simple, she does not want to become Lou Che's burden. The Nu Tribe abducted her there, Ye Li suppressed himself, not daring to offend her further, all of this makes one thing clear, the thing they want in exchange must be of extreme importance, perhaps it concerns the tribe's entire nation. She only did whatever she could, this way, she would not become Lou Che's burden.

Her top priority right now is to return to the Celestial Empire, spread the news, preventing Lou Che from going to the Nu Capital to make an exchange.

The value of myself is determined by myself, it is not up to anyone to manipulate my destiny, Gui Wan silently says this to herself with utmost certainty in her heart.

Just when the atmosphere livens up inside the carriage, the outside suddenly becomes noisy, the originally little noise, instantly spreads out, gradually increasing, the carriage is immediately silenced, Gui Wan is puzzled, softly asking: "What's going on outside?"

The several women's faces seems to tense up along with the increasingly loud noises. The girl in yellow crawls to the carriage opening, lightly opening a small crack in the door, turning her head back, her face pales, seriously saying: "Seems like we've encountered bandits."

Two exclamations sounds within the carriage, the girl in yellow fiercely glares at them, snapping out: "What you panicking for, be quiet."

Silence is once again restored. This horse carriage is originally the tail of the travelling merchants and performance troupe, sounds of fighting have yet to be heard upfront.

"This is too dangerous, why don't we take advantage of the current situation

and quickly jump out?" One of the women suggests, her expression filled with panic, even her words were somewhat incoherent.

"You think you can live if you jump out? Where do you think this is, this is the wilderness, if we don't follow the carriage team, we'll definitely die halfway there." The girl in yellow once again snaps, her expression somewhat impatient, "We have no other choice right now, quickly take out all valuables, place it together. Then find something like ash or mud, and smear it all over your face."

Infected by her calm attitude, the women all take out their valuables, placing them together. Not sure from where she found some sort of black powder, the girl in yellow first gathers some, smearing it onto her face, and even let loose her hair, suddenly becoming unkempt, seeing Gui Wan motionless, she pulls onto her, saying: "Do you not want to live?" Gathering more ash about to smear it, she suddenly see Gui Wan's face revealed under the dim light, in a moment of hesitation, she freezes.

"You....." Breaking out of her trance, she opens her mouth not knowing what to say, once again gathering a load of black ash, smearing it onto Gui Wan's face, she carefully, thoroughly covers her face, whilst ordering her: "In a bit, you must definitely stay behind me, must lay low." Withdrawing her hand, she still feels uneasy, once again sprinkling more black powder onto Gui Wan's body, and only then did she turn around and focus on others.

The noise outside seems to be getting louder, and also getting closer, the women sits in a circle, speechlessly gazing at each other. Gui Wan was also rather panicky, she has never ran into a situation like this before, right now, she is feeling even more at loss and helpless.

These past two days, she has always been on alert, she feels so so tired, in face of crisis at this very moment, she cannot help but to think of everything, amongst this chaotic mess, that blurry figure once again returns to her mind, the one who vowed to protect her, to dote on her......

If, if she really manages to once again return to the Celestial Empire, manages to once again return to his side, she suddenly thinks of something, if she really manages to return, she must ask him:

Do you love me?

Can you love me?

Can you love me more than anyone in this world?

Because my soul.....is too lonely.

No sound can be heard within the darkness, only the sound of the people's tense and irregular breathing can be heard within the carriage, but Gui Wan actually feels at peace, the entire state of her mind has reached a state of lucidity.

The carriage doors suddenly sounds a series of desperate knocks, the women all simultaneously look over, within the darkness, their vision blurs, only the carriage door would sound a loud bang from time to time, the group of women inside could feel the carriage shake, with a sound of "kuang", the carriage doors are opened from the outside. All the women shrinks backwards, trembling, they dare not to make a single move, Gui Wan positioned behind the girl in yellow, looks outside, outside the carriage stands three tall strong men, their faces vicious, carrying an air of cold brutality.

"Come out, all come out." The man stood in front amongst the three, harshly shouts, seeing the entire carriage filled with women, they did not get physical, only yelling with their mouths.

The five of them follows the order and slowly gets off the carriage, the girl in yellow being first to step out, amongst the five women, there is even one who was scared numb, unable to stand firmly as she got off the carriage, thus falling to the ground, the three brawny men grew impatient, constantly yelling as they lead the five people to the central carriage team.

The skies had yet to brighten up, all ranks of the travelling merchants and performance troupe stands together, everyone's complexion not looking too good, the travelling merchant leader and performance troupe leader even more so had faces of soil colour, the several guards of the carriage team seems to have been injured, lying to the side wailing, yet no one took any notice.

Along the way, Gui Wan keeps her head lowered, following behind the girl in yellow, everywhere around them because of the fight that occurred, appears extremely messy. Bloodstains everywhere, the view making people tremble in fear. The five of them were rushed to where the females stand, a large number

of women snuggling into a ball, muffled sobs floating around in the air, stirring everyone to feel troubled at heart and perplexed in mind.

The bandits also forms a circle, circling around the gathering of people, holding the fire torches up high, lighting up half the sky.

"Is this all the money?" A shrill voice sounds, a thin person clad in black stands in centre, loudly asking the performance troupe leader and travelling merchant leader who were begging for mercy, his face showing a look of disbelief.

"That really is all we have, with the huge disaster in the Nu Tribe, we couldn't earn any money, so are returning to the Celestial Empire....." Seeing the person appear to refuse to believe this, the travelling merchant leader almost cried out loud, his plump body now bent into a ball, "We really have no more. May this hero please show mercy ah."

The performance troupe leader at the side was already stunned, trembling as he dares not to speak. The petite figure in black upon seeing this, lowly curses out loud, running up to a brawny man who appears to be the leader, whispering into his ears. The brawny man stands up, heading over to the middle group, the rest of the brotherhood upon seeing him approach, all steps aside to make way for him.

The brawny man reaches the middle, looking over the performance troupe leader and travelling merchant leader several times, being glared at by those sharp and moody eyes, the performance troupe leader also couldn't support himself any longer, wordlessly passing out. A slight cry is sounded from the group of women, but immediately fades, no one dares to make another sound. The brawny man very quickly glances over the one who fainted on the ground, walking up to where all the valuables have been gathered, and roughly observes the gold and silver goods on the ground.

"These bandits seems to only raid valuables and not kill, our luck can be considered pretty good." The girl in yellow softly says to Gui Wan behind her.

Gui Wan returns a smile, quietly saying: "It seems so."

Seeing Gui Wan's black smeared face seeming to not show any particular signs of panic, the girl in yellow inevitably grew curious, secretly thinking what kind of identity this girl has.

Whilst the two of them quietly spoke, the brawny man in the middle was just about to leave after looking through the valuables, when he suddenly turns back, taking another careful look at the valuables on the ground, crouching down, he picks out a silver ribbon from amongst the valuables, revealing a very faint trace of surprise and wonder. Everyone did not understand, he did not show any interest towards other valuables, yet picks out a very humble looking ribbon, indeed, it is extremely strange. The brawny mind thinks for a moment, waving his hand to summon an underling, making someone hold the other end of the ribbon, he draws out his broadsword, amidst a burst of screams, the blade ruthlessly cuts down at the middle of the ribbon.

The ribbon remains the same, it did not split into two like everyone has expected, causing everyone to receive a shock, followed by a burst of quiet mumbles. Even the girl in yellow shows a face of surprise, softly mumbling: "That's.....wild silk yarn right?"

Gui Wan softly chews on her lips, using the light from the fire, she carefully observes that brawny man, a well-defined square face, stern expression, slightly different from the average bandits. Deep inside, she grows a little nervous, Gui Wan knits her brows together, attentively looking on from the sides.

The brawny man loudly yells out: "Whose is this?" His voice loud and clear, suddenly echoing throughout the open wilderness. Everyone looks at one another, all simultaneously revealing a look of fear.

The performance troupe leader lying on the ground, slowly wakes up at this moment, under such yelling, he once again pulls up his entire body, seeing the ribbon in the brawny man's hand, he starts panicking, piling words onto words, his mouths repeatedly mutters: "It's not......it's not mine......"

Unable to help but to curse out in her mind, Gui Wan bitterly smiles, this performance troupe leader confesses without being under duress, really is stupid to an unreachable level, thinking of her own safety, she leans back slightly, completely hiding herself behind the girl in yellow.

The brawny man's eyes instantly flashes over, looking at the performance troupe leader on the ground, asking: "It is yours?"

"No.....it's not.....it is......" Under the brawny man's forceful prowess, the

performance troupe leader is unable to make any sense of his words, sometimes denying, sometime affirming, with a sudden chilling glare from the brawny man, he desperately cries out, "It was given by someone, it doesn't......count as mine."

"Oh?" Revealing an expression of a cold smile, rich in meaning, the brawny man puts his broadsword away, "Such a rare ribbon of white gold and wild silk yarn, what kind of stupid honorary person would keep this on them?"

Once the performance troupe leader hears this, he immediately looks towards the gathering of females, when Gui Wan gave it him, it was midnight, the skies were dark and gloomy, plus her face was covered, although he did not get a clear look of her face, those pair of eyes that were more beautiful than stars left the performance troupe leader with a deep impression, now that he is desperate to protect his life, he hastily searches amongst the crowd of people.

Gui Wan's face is smeared grey, in rough clothing, mixed within the crowd; not to mention the skies has yet to brighten up at this moment, the light of the fire torches also didn't reach very far, causing the performance troupe leader to grow uncontrollably panicky, how is he to recognise her, such boundless surroundings, his face grows even more pale, mumbling: "It was clearly a...... woman who gave it me.....it was clearly....."

The brawny man reveals a look of impatience, the performance troupe leader becomes even more nervous to even stop, just when everyone thought the performance troupe leader was bound to die, a rumbling sound can be heard from a distance, and gently, gradually, grows louder, everyone starts panicking, not knowing what else could happen to them tonight.

The girl in yellow listens carefully for a while, her expression suddenly changes, currently showing a look of difficulty, she quietly speaks, not clear whether she is speaking to Gui Wan or speaking to herself: "This is the sound of hooves of an army....."

The sound is clearly coming from the direction they came from, Gui Wan's heart suddenly tightens, face also pales slightly.

The ones who are looking worse than Gui Wan is perhaps the bandits, hearing the hooves of a regular army, they wildly pick up all the valuables, planning to run for their lives. The carriage team seems to have met their saviours, expressing cheers of joy, originally soft sounding, but upon seeing the bandits planning to flee the scene, the noise starts to get louder, echoing throughout the land. The daring and also injured guards of the carriage team also summons up their courage, some running forward, wanting to snatch back the stolen goods, the scene suddenly turns chaotic, getting out of hand.

The girl in yellow turns back, saying to Gui Wan: "I presume it is the Nu Tribe army coming." Suddenly noticing Gui Wan's expression, she asks in puzzlement: "What's wrong?"

"The arrival of the army, to me, isn't necessarily a good thing." Gui Wan smiles, bitterness composing the majority of the smile.

Who would have thought that when the girl in yellow heard this, her smeared black face would reveal a sweet smile, joyfully saying: "You too? What a coincidence, it's the same for me. How about we think of a way to get out of here whilst it's chaotic?"

Unable to control the expression of surprise, Gui Wan looks at her, thinking of how she performed earlier, indeed not like the average girl, thinking a little, the sound of joy filled shouting suddenly travels to her ears, raising her head to look over, a Nu army is already at a short distance away, someone amongst the carriage team says in surprise: "It's Prince Ye Li's army ah."

Gently gritting her teeth, Gui Wan faces the girl in yellow and nods her head, saying in a firm tone: "Okay, let us give it a try."

[1] The last lines of **Anxiety of a Beauty** by Qin Guan, also mentioned in chapter 12.

Although a less eventful chapter than the previous one, I guess this chapter is richer in the emotions it delivers from Gui Wan's dream of her mother, to her feelings of loneliness, although she does not say she loves Lou Che, she expresses her inner desire to have someone to relieve her years of cultivated indifference and thus loneliness, I guess as her husband, as the man who made those heavy promises, Lou Che is the one she wishes to turn to, to place her faith on, to help her to relieve such a miserable life that her mother has drilled into her.

Full



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ran Yi

Hearing her answer, the girl in yellow smiles in appreciation, quickly grabbing Gui Wan's hand, searching for directions amongst the chaotic crowd, whilst saying to Gui Wan: "Going to Yu Xia Guan (Yu Xia Checkpoint) from here, only requires a day's journey on horse. Let us steal a horse whilst it's still chaotic." Once she had said this, she had already extended her hand, with a clean cut of a knife in form of her hand, she hacks down a nearby bandit who was fleeing in panic.

Seeing her extremely smooth movement, Gui Wan is stunned, immediately following her as they constantly run forward, her ears filled with loud noises, the figures before her eyes in disorder, in a chaotic situation impossible to resolve, Gui Wan can only choose to trust this girl in yellow in front of her.

The Nu army has already arrived at the rear end of the carriages, battling it out with the bandits, and the Nu army's main force spreads out towards them, going all around the chaotic crowd, seeming to be searching for something.

The girl in yellow also senses something is not right, turning her head, she carries a trace of slyness in her smile, asking: "What are the Nu army searching

for? Are they looking for you?"

Returning a smile, excessively sweet, Gui Wan cannot help but to smile, smoothly asking: "What about you? Why are you escaping?" If her escape is considered justifiable, then the actions of this girl in yellow, has also already revealed the extreme suspiciousness of her identity.

Didn't think that Gui Wan under silent admittance, would actually question her back, the girl in yellow turns around with a kick, knocking down a bandit in front, one hand grabbing onto the horse reins, turning to look at the absolutely breathless Gui Wan, calmly saying: "In times of emergency, let us throw aside identity related questions. If we don't leave now, it may be too late."

Gui Wan hurries forward, the girl in yellow launches herself onto the horse, and then pulls Gui Wan up onto the horseback, both her legs clipped onto the horse's stomach, the horse raises its hooves and runs forward, charging out. The horse speed is not actually very fast, galloping amongst the chaotic crowd, but also taking into account the safety of the people below.

Right when Gui Wan's heart relaxes, a particularly loud and very inflamed voice enters her ears: "Suo Ge Ta......" This voice pierces through half of the wilderness, overpowering the many figures, and shoots right into Gui Wan's ears.

Turning her head amidst the bumpy ride, Gui Wan looks back in direction of the Nu army behind, leading the Nu army at the rear of the carriage fleet, is Ye Li. His face holds anxiety and anger, and also a type of complicated expression that makes people sense his pain upon looking at him. Ye Li raises the horse whip high and strikes down, breaking up the crowd before the horse, doing all he can to rush forward.

Gui Wan starts to slightly panic, didn't think that with this smeared black face, she still cannot escape his eyes, under her watch, he is already shortening the distance between them, Gui Wan pulls on the yellow clothing, loudly saying: "Almost catching up behind."

The girl in yellow does not look back, answering against the wind, her voice still remains as steady as ever: "I will not let him catch up."

Hearing her seemingly very confident words, Gui Wan's heart is put at ease,

tightly clutching onto the girl in yellow's waist, she turns her head to look back at the chaotic scene halfway across the wilderness, she can still sense Ye Li's strongly fired up emotions that seems to be able to burn down all in his presence, that kind of struggling, sinking and unwilling complications, even in this situation of clashing weapons, thundering cries, it still sinks in too deep to be overshadowed.

Seeing with his own eyes the narrowing of distance, meter by meter, Ye Li loudly cries out: "Suo Ge Ta, come back....."

The girl in yellow slightly turns her head, still grinning amongst the chaos as she says: "You're called Suo Ge Ta? Goddess of the moon?interesting." Within a glance, Ye Li had actually reached within ten meters of distance already, straightening her face, the girl in yellow frees one hand, digging into her clothes and pulls something out, spreading it along the ground behind them.

Everything blurs before Gui Wan, only thinking that the girl in yellow dispersed something like flowers from her hand, little green balls rolls onto the ground under the hooves of Ye Li's horse, behind, the horse loudly neighs, Gui Wan cannot help but to look back, and sees Ye Li's horse looking like it has gone mad, hopping and jumping on that one spot, the distance immediately pulls further apart again.

"Suo Ge Ta.....you cannot leave." Ye Li desperately pulls at the reigns, whilst roaring out his hisses, looking like he's gone crazy, still wanting to rush forward, his voice, filled with panic striking a deep chord.

Not wanting to listen, but the sound still insists on drilling into her ear, Gui Wan feels slightly shaky, watching this foreign prince show a face of panic, gradually blurring into the wind. Right now, the horse has already passed through the entire crowd, looks like they are able to head straight east, when something sharp pierces through the air like a shooting star, aiming to stab into the two people on the horse.

Gui Wan had yet to react to this, when a cool feeling fleetingly passes by her arm, a long arrow skims past her clothing, greatly startled, she immediately looks back.

Not far away, a few Nu soldiers had already noticed the target that the prince

is chasing after, raising the bow and arrows in their hands, aiming right at Gui Wan.

Ye Li also sees the current situation, cold sweat dripping, heart greatly disturbed, he furiously shouts out: "Stop, all of you stop, no one is allowed to harm her.....stop it."

The entire Nu army all found it strange, this is originally the Nu Tribe's great way of arresting fugitives, yet they are being ordered not to shoot arrows right now, it is just rather puzzling. The majority of the Nu army upon hearing this order, lowers their bow and arrows, not daring to make a move, but one particular soldier upon hearing the order, could not react in time, the arrow in hand had already shot out from the bow, piercing through the wind, shooting towards the person on the horse.

He lowers his hand, turning his head to sneak a look, Ye Li had already dismounted the horse, furiously storming over, never has anyone seen this dignified prince this angry before, heart in panic, he had yet to voice out his explanation, when Ye Li's blade was already swinging directly at him.

Everyone was trembling in shock by that moment in which the soldier's blood was sprayed, spraying a nicely curved arc into the air, the crimson red blood splatters, that soldier practically didn't even have the time to express his shock, and Ye Li had already chopped at his throat in one swing, his corpse immediately collapsing with a "peng" sound, shocking awake the consciousness of everyone around them.

"Didn't I just say, you're not allowed to harm her?" An absolutely chilling voice is emitted from Ye Li's mouth, on the sharp sword in his hand, traces of blood trails down the edge of the blade, dripping onto the ground of the wilderness. Ye Li's face carries evil and rage, and also a deep trace of unwilling acceptance, raising his eyes, attentively watching that horse disappear into the wilderness.

The howling sound of wind blowing past, lasted a long time before it faded, a long neigh enters the ear, and the horse comes to a stop. Gui Wan takes a deep deep breath, regaining composure of herself. After going through a crisis between life and death at Feng Qi Slope, she has since developed a sense of fear

of riding horses, unless at a moment of crisis, she would never dare to easily ride a horse. Once she slightly settles her heart, the girl in yellow had already dismounted the horse, turning her head to look at Gui Wan, laughingly saying: "Crisis temporarily lifted, you can get off and take a little rest now."

Following along in dismounting the horse, Gui Wan looks around, this place is no longer the wilderness, green grassland, a look into the distance of no boundary, when the wind blows by, there is a sort of captivating wave of grass, wave after wave, like a huge gentle hand is brushing over the earth, even bringing along with it, the refreshing taste of the wind brushing against one's face. Suddenly feeling that in her eyes, there holds such beautiful scenery, even though the crisis is not yet completely over in this moment, Gui Wan still feels as though she is in a state of deep intoxication.

"This is the most hidden passage from Yu Xia Guan, known as 'Green Sea', very beautiful right?" Seeing Gui Wan's expression, the girl in yellow couldn't hold back her smile, and slowly explains.

Gently nodding her head, Gui Wan slightly smiles as she answers: "Indeed very beautiful."

Another burst of wind blows over again, the green sea billows, and the girl in yellow closes her eyes, also following Gui Wan in breathing the fresh air of nature, opening her eyes, her eyes suddenly sharpens up, turning to look at Gui Wan, asking: "Who are you? Why is the Nu Tribe's Prince Ye Li chasing after you? You should be a Celestial Empire person right?"

"Asking so many questions in one breath, even I do not know how I should answer them." Gui Wan leisurely says in reply.

"Then I shall directly ask you," The girl in yellow approaches Gui Wan, staring dead into her eyes, seeming to want to see through her, "Are you the Nu Tribe's spy?"

Without immediately answering, they attentively look over each other again, Gui Wan after careful consideration, resolutely says: "I am not." Suddenly pausing, she asks back, "What about you? Not only skilled in martial arts, but also bold and daring. Who exactly are you?"

The girl in yellow and Gui Wan stare into each other's eyes for a long while,

finally unable to hold back, laughing out loud, a rarely seen hearty cheerfulness shines brightly from the girl's body, "I also don't think you are." Sighing in relief, she sits down on the ground, appearing comfortable and relaxed.

"I'm called Lin Ran Yi, descendant of the Celestial Empire's military family." A simple introduction, she turns her head, looking at Gui Wan.

Gui Wan leisurely laughs, thinking back to how the two of them went through life and death together, she too gained a little sense of trust towards her, slightly parting her lips, just about to introduce herself, when she suddenly sees Lin Ran Yi's face change, suddenly jumping up from the grass, pulling Gui Wan along as she runs.

Lin Ran Yi drags along Gui Wan as they reach an area where the weedy grass is most luxuriant, squatting down, signalling Gui Wan to also squat down, until the grass has completely concealed both their figures, she quietly says to Gui Wan: "Someone's here."

Without the slightest trace of fear, Gui Wan focuses on keeping her body hidden, suggesting: "Do you still have the green balls from before? Throw them out onto the grass where they'd definitely go through."

Lin Ran Yi slightly hesitates for a moment, recalling how the horse had already reached to side to eat grass, hiding right here, indeed isn't the best plan, reaching into her clothing, she once again grabs a handful of green balls, sprinkling it over the area of grass their horse had passed by before.

Just as they expected, only a while later did they hear the sound of horse hooves, but there is only one horse, following the traces of galloping horse prints that Gui Wan, Lin Ran Yi had left behind. Walking up to the area where the green balls were scattered, the horse suddenly neighs loudly, the person on the horse receives a shock, not understanding what is happening, desperately pulling at the reigns, before he could put the horse under control, Lin Ran Yi had already jumped up, hand moving like a knife, aiming to cut at the neck of the one on the horse.

The person on the horse immediately responds in a moment of panic, he avoids the attack, abandoning the horse as he dismounts, raising his foot at the same time, followed with a kick towards Lin Ran Yi.

Lin Ran Yi immediately moves around it, with a turn of her body, aiming to amputate the person's foot, that person steps back just in time, the two people did not succeed in their attacks, both backing away, looking at one another, Lin Ran Yi was absolutely surprised.

Even Gui Wan is a little frightened, originally thinking it was the Nu army catching up, didn't think that it would actually be the leader of the bandits.

The bandit leader backs away, his eyes rolling back and forth between Gui Wan and Lin Ran Yi, seeing Gui Wan and Lin Ran Yi's defensive stance, he suddenly reveals a look of helplessness, after careful consideration, from his sleeves he takes out a silver ribbon, inquiring: "Who is this ribbon?"

To mention such a question in this moment, it would inevitably appear rather strange, neither Lin Ran Yi nor Gui Wan knew how to respond. Gui Wan even more so found it absolutely absurd, the bandit leader catching up to them, just to ask this one question, indeed inconceivable, after a moment of pondering, she takes the exact same ribbon from her sleeves, answering: "It's mine."

Originally still feeling quite doubtful, but upon seeing the ribbon, his eyes sparkles, the bandit walks upfront, maintaining three step distance, not caring for Lin Ran Yi taking on a defensive posture, he kneels on the ground, very respectfully saying: "This lowly one, Lou Sheng has come late, may Madam pardon my sin."

Lou Sheng kneels on the grass ground, after a while later, the green waves of grass constantly billows, yet no movement can be detected by his ears, unable to hold back, he raises his head, and sees the blurred look of Gui Wan seeming to hesitate, lowering his head in thinking, he understands her concerns, taking out a little waist pendant from his waist side, holding it high up.

Seeing this scout of the Lou Residence's waist pendant, with a familiar "Lou" [楼] character circled on the face of it, a ray of warm feeling slowly rises, Gui Wan finally smiles comfortably, saying: "No need to be so courteous, please stand up."

With a simple sound of reply, he suddenly gets up, having long heard of Prime Minister Madam's heavenly elegance, to personally meet her today, but sees Gui Wan's face actually be smeared with unknown black powder, in thick layers,

appearing in an absolutely sorry state, only that pair of quietly deep eyes, carries a slight quality of crystal clearness, illuminating like the stars in the skies. Not daring to cause any offense, Lou Sheng removes his eyes from her, organising his train of thoughts, reporting: "Lord Prime Minister is already rushing through day and night, heading to Yu Xia Guan, and shall be arriving within two days. May Madam follow me to Yu Xia Guan."

Listening up to this point, Lin Ran Yi who was standing aside, could not hold back her words, muttering: "Lord Prime Minister? Are you Prime Minister Lou's wife?"

Gui Wan gently nods her head, affirming this, at the side, Lou Sheng respectfully interrupts: "Madam, we cannot stay here any longer, the Nu army seems to have not given up yet, and will be catching up in no time."

At the mention of Nu army, the feeling of the arrow skimming past her sleeve before, seems to have resurfaced in her mind, Gui Wan senses a chill running up her spine, nodding in acceptance of Lou Sheng's suggestion, in a situation where Lin Ran Yi also could not disagree with the course of action, after waiting for the crazed horse to calm down, three people two horses, heads into the eastern direction.

Lou Sheng seems to be extremely familiar with this area of terrain, leading Lin Ran Yi and Gui Wan across Green Sea, after an entire day and entire night, they finally made it to Yu Xia Guan's city gates.

[玉硖关] Yu Xia Guan, Gui Wan actually feels a warm sense of relief, having gone through almost a month and half's journey, she has finally returned. Whilst still caught in a moment of overwhelming feelings, the city gates has already opened, a small squad of city guarding troops runs out from the gates, seeing the three people, they all spread out, aligning themselves into lines. In an armour of feather white, boots of vine green, a figure of extremely superior slender build, with a handsome face like frost, slowly walking out from within the city is actually General Lin Rui En.

His slightly cold expression upon seeing Lin Ran Yi, reveals a trace of tenderness, instantaneously creating such sense as though watching the clouds

clear away, revealing the sunlight, "[Older] Sister, you finally returned."

"Rui En, I've made you worried," Lin Ran Yi walks up front, waving the whip in hand as she loudly calls out laughingly, "I'm back."

Not only is it just Lin Rui En smiling, even all the soldiers stood by the sides were overflowing with heartfelt smiles. Whilst everyone is filled with joy, Lin Ran Yi pulls Gui Wan forward, introducing: "This is Prime Minister Lou's Madam, we went through thick and thin together, escaping from the Nu Capital."

Lin Rui En turns towards Gui Wan, the very moment their eyes met, his smile slightly falters, brows lightly crinkles, concealing the constantly throbbing pain in his heart, speaking with slight difficulty: "Madam Lou....." The following words remains stuck in his throat, unable to speak out.

Gently nodding her head in acknowledgement, Gui Wan smiles, "Always somehow manage to come across General Lin and your family in moments of crisis, Gui Wan really is extremely fortunate." Always running into him in important timings, before she knew it, she had already gained additional feelings of rare trust and security towards him.

His lips faintly spreading into a smile, the cold as frost youth displays an extremely rare expression of tenderness, right within the surprised eyes of all those around, his face suddenly shows a drastic change, shooting forward in an arrow-like step, his hands gently hooks, holding up her body as it falls backward.



Gui Wan's heart gradually feels at ease, the fatigue caused by an entire day and night of hurried travelling because of her mental relaxation, suddenly overtakes her body, vision fades, starting with a tiny spot of fuzziness, spreading out, her body feels light, falling backwards, the final image her eyes catches onto, is the small view of the light blue sky. Within her drowsy state, she feels a

very warm pair of strong big hands, supporting her, allowing her to safely sink into dreamland.

At that moment, when Gui Wan suddenly fainted, Lou Sheng and Lin Ran Yi both wanted to extend a helping hand at the same time, having yet to respond in time, Lin Rui En had already rushed forward, holding Gui Wan in his arms, his face ashen, actually revealing a look of panic and heartache, completely oblivious to the reaction of those around him, he picks up the person in his arms, running towards the inside of the city gates, throwing the stunned people to the back his mind.

The soldiers were absolutely surprised, Lou Sheng and Lin Ran Yi stands at the same spot, looking in the direction of the gates, one with an expressionless face, one with a look of gloominess, one surprised, one worried.

Very gentle warmth and shining brightness entering her sight, Gui Wan slowly opens her eyes, meeting a pair of very beautiful pupils, the usual cold, has disappeared without a trace in this moment, and is even displaying a look of warmth, softening the contours of the cold general's face, his faint smile like the wind, Gui Wan softly calls out: "General Lin?"

Wanting to raise her hand, she gets caught in an entanglement, and only then did she realise she is actually grabbing onto his hand, Gui Wan was embarrassingly surprised, immediately letting go.

A sense of loss overcomes his hand, like grabbing empty air, Lin Rui En withdraws his hand, once again regaining that sort of ice cold appearance: "How are you? Are you feeling well?"

"En." Gui Wan very softly sounds a reply, lightly moving her body, looking as though she has already recovered a lot, she looks at Lin Rui En, heart filled with unlimited gratefulness, "I have troubled you, General."

"Not at all, Madam is too polite." He cannot tell whether it is disappointment or something else, to hear the two words of thank you come from her mouth, seems not to be what he wishes for. Whilst unconscious, she did not seem to sleep peacefully, at the very beginning, she was clutching onto the maid's sleeve who was there to help cleanse her body, once he made her release her hold from

the sleeve, she maneuverers her wrist into grabbing his hand instead, he clearly could have avoided it, but after repeated thoughts, he just left her to it in the end. The strength in her hand was not at all strong, yet it was like a cuff, catching him in layers of traps, with no way to break free, he cannot tell what this feeling is, perhaps all of this, is only the best excuse he can use to stay here.

The room is filled with silence, Gui Wan takes a little look around her surroundings, and only then did she realise she is inside the military camp, turning her head, she notices this particularly strange atmosphere, silent to the point of seeming mysterious, Lin Rui En also loses that stern coldness, a rather peculiar expression overflowing from within his eyes, seeming to be struggling over something.

In face of the silence within the room, Gui Wan struggles to find a conversation starter, whilst racking her brain, her belly suddenly produces a grumbling sound.

Lin Rui En was startled for a moment, but then couldn't help but to quietly sound a laugh, the mysterious air from before is thoroughly swept away, he turns around to grab hold of the already prepared savoury snacks, passing it to Gui Wan.

Having not bothered with dietary on their way here, Gui Wan faces these exquisite snacks she has longed for, melting into a satisfied smile, she begins to focus on gobbling them all up.

Seeing her slowly start eating, the snacks one small bite by one small bite entering her mouth, his mood also follows her actions, bit by bit brightening up, as long as he sees her smile, he would feel everything is perfect, seeing her in a sorry state, he would feel his heart aching. In a situation where he is clearly aware of her identity, he still cannot possibly control such feelings that will definitely grow overly complicated one day.

Sunlight streams into the room, as if covering it in a layer of gold coloured veil. Black hair like silk, a stunningly elegant girl sits at the bed eating, whilst the young general in an armour of feather white holds the plate, maintaining this posture as though he is not aware of how tiring it is, only in that pair of eyes, there shows an occasional flash of expression.

"Lord Prime Minister." Upon seeing a faraway figure rapidly galloping forward on the horse, Lou Sheng who is standing by outside the military camp immediately kneels down, in respectful greeting.

"Where's Gui Wan? Is she here?" The elegantly handsome face is no longer able to conceal his anxiousness as Lou Che asks in slight nervousness.

Knowing that Lou Che has rapidly rushed eight hundred li to get here in an urgent manner, his original words of persuasion, asking of him to get some rest, could not bear to leave his mouth, Lou Sheng points towards the biggest tent in the middle, saying: "Madam is in there."

How long has it been? How long has he not seen her?

Unable to contain some worked up emotions, Lou Che did not even turn his head as he quickly paces himself towards the main tent.

Having never seen Prime Minster Lou like this before, Lou Sheng could only watch on in surprise, when he suddenly remembers, General Lin is still in the tent, the scene from this morning at the city gates unintentionally flashes by his mind, intuition tells him, subtle feelings is entangled within that situation. He hurriedly follows after Lou Che, softly calling out: "Lord Prime Minister, please wait."

Not hearing Lou Sheng's calling, his eyes seeming to only have that tent in sight, his steps does not stop, arriving before the tent, with quite a bit of force, in a moment where Lou Sheng was unable to stop him in time, he lifts the thick curtain of the tent.

Very rarely does he see Gui Wan with a smile like this, void of any sort of external factors, made up solely of heartfelt joy, under the sunlight like gold dust, she appears even more spectacularly radiant.....Lou Che peripheral vision sweeps across the inside of the room, his cheerful smile instantly freezes, in the moment where he walks into the tent, the expression on his face fades away, patting the dust off his body, he reveals an air of elegant nobility, leisurely saying: "Looks like, this time I have General Lin to thank once again."

Hearing this voice, Lin Rui En looks back, not at all surprised, he sternly replies: "Prime Minister Lou is too polite."

"I owe you yet another favour." His face against the light, suddenly lightens, suddenly darkens, be it joy or anger, it is difficult to make out.

Slowly making his way over to the bed, he picks up one of the exquisite snacks, placing it in his mouth as he takes a small bite, as though savouring the taste, he lightly mocks: "Are all the snacks within the military this nice?"

Hearing this, Lin Rui En's face shows a look of slight discomfort, it is difficult to explain that these snacks have been specially prepared for Gui Wan.

"General has made thoughtful preparations, it is I who have troubled General." Realising that Lin Rui En seems to be cautious, even the tender expression on his face dropped the moment Lou Che walked through the door, before she knew it, Gui Wan had already spoke up to break through the slight tension.

Making no comment, the corners of Lou Che's lips curls up into a somewhat forced smile, his deep eyes turning to gaze at Gui Wan, tenderness gradually leaking out from within those eyes filled with complexity, his hand reaches towards Gui Wan's cheek, touching her ever so delicate skin that is seemingly able to suck in his hand, his expression becomes full of sympathy and affection as he very gently mutters: "You lost weight."

Little traces of heartache spreads out into the air, even the sunlight got infected, dimming down quite a bit.

Feeling greatly at discomfort, Lin Rui En ignores the sour feeling that is gradually growing within his heart, suddenly standing up, the agility in his movement carries a sense of strong feelings, "Prime Minister Lou has come from afar, I shall not disturb you."

"General." That clearly resonant voice calls him to a stop, Lin Rui En looks back, and sees Gui Wan's sparkling smile, followed by a word of heartfelt "thank you".

His stern nature was unable to suppress that moment of falter, Lin Rui En reveals a look of difficulty in his eyes, disappearing within a flash, he nods his head before lifting the tent curtain and leaves.

The sunlight outside the tent is still shining on splendidly, yet Lin Rui En could not at all sense the brightness in this moment. Whilst turning around, he sees Lin

Ran Yi standing at a spot quite close by, walking up to her, his cold expression gives way to gentle warmth, "Sister."

"Rui En," Lin Ran Yi shows a face of utmost seriousness, within it there also carries a rarely seen severity, softly saying: "I need to talk to you."



Inside the tent, because of Lin Rui En's leave, the place is suddenly filled with a heavily silent atmosphere. Having not seen each other for so long, Gui Wan's heart holds thousands and thousands of things to say, yet in this moment where only the two of them are here, no words could leave her mouth, those slightly parted lips curls into a stunning curve, faintly smiling without a word.

Lou Che's hand that was on Gui Wan's cheek, endlessly wanders, roaming down to her fair neck, feeling the blood smoothly flowing through her veins under his touch, he softly sighs, and with little force, he hooks onto Gui Wan's neck as he pulls her forward, lowering his head at the same time, he kisses those red lips that he has been longing for, for so long.

Gui Wan had yet to react in time, when she was led forward by the force on her neck, upon raising her head, she was already met with that pair of deeply mysterious, complex and obscure eyes, in them, they also seem to be enshrouded with layers and layers of dense fog, traces and traces of endless tenderness.....within that startling moment, a warm and humid feeling has already melted down in her mouth, both lips dependently playing with one another, enlacing into sweet struggles, in contrast to Lou Che's gentle and refined appearance, his kiss carries a trace of domineering force that allows for no rejection.

Only when she almost couldn't breath did they part, Gui Wan gently breathes in, wanting to breathe in some fresh air, with a gentle sound of exhale, Lou Che once again closes in, once again affectionately placing his lips onto hers, domineering yet tender, as though the two traits have disorderly entangled together, causing Gui Wan to swallow both her breathing and gentle sigh in one.

"You're so beautiful....." After a long time did he finally release Gui Wan, voraciously gazing at her flushed face, he lightly praises, as though it is the first time he has seen her, unwilling to easily let go of any details, he wants to imprint her into his heart, but because his voice has yet to recover from the deep kissing, it carries slight huskiness, revealing a deep thick tone.

With no wine, the air is still able to carry such sweetness that makes people fall deep into intoxication, Gui Wan heavily breathes, the heat seeming to have all gathered in her cheeks, returning her gaze to Lou Che's focused eyes, she cannot help but to reveal a look of confusion, she can deeply feel a great change in his behaviour.

"Gui Wan," His throat clearly hoarse, Lou Che evidently shows a gradual growth of complexity in his eyes, "You see, I seem to have fallen in love with you."

Her body lightly receives a shock, Gui Wan dares not to believe his words as she stares at him, her lips curls up into a thin smile, appearing slightly hazy, "Really a confession far beyond my expectations....."

His finger raises her chin, forcing her to not look away, he quietly, deeply, says: "I know you are still hesitating, I can wait, we have a very long time. But you must not fall in love with someone else, you got that?" Because of the containing factor of uncertainty, his tone instead sounds more firm and unwavering.

"I will not ask about the entanglement between you and the Nu prince, nor would I pursue the matter of cause, as long as you forget about this matter, I will take care of everything."

He seems to be getting increasingly annoyed of other people setting their sights on Gui Wan, such attention that does not come from him, makes him feel ill at ease, makes him disgusted, he strongly wants to write off such existence,

his wife, is most definitely not one who can be subjected to any intended meddling.



"Your highness, any further, and we will be reaching Yu Xia Guan, we're already inside the Celestial Empire's borders, it is best that we retreat now." A spy dressed as a soldier rapidly hurries over to report.

A gloomy face, coldly, wordlessly gazes ahead, although he can only see the vast wilderness, he is actually very aware that ahead is the place nicknamed "Iron Wall", Yu Xia Guan, his heart heavy, hand tightly clasped onto the handle of his sword, feeling somewhat hesitant.

"Your highness, you cannot advance further, it is said that two months ago, Lin Rui En has already been transferred to the borders from the Capital, guarding up ahead, we have not brought many soldiers this time, it is better to retreat now and slowly make our plans." Speaking up to persuade this stubborn prince, the soldier appears very earnest^[1], the prince's fury from a couple days back still remains in his mind, leaving a deeply imprinted impression, occasionally thinking back to it will immediately give him the chills.

Waves and waves of struggles overtakes his heart, Ye Li's hand tightens even more, the back of it red with rage. After two days of chasing, he still didn't catch up to her, unwillingness difficult to express, floods out from his chest, a clogging sensation causing him extreme discomfort. All of their original plans have been messed up, the exchange is also no longer possible to proceed, and she......has already left, viciously gritting his teeth, Ye Li roars: "Immediately send a message to Royal Father, tell him, we are resting in camp thirty li away from Yu Xia Guan, on standby."

The soldier receives a sudden shock, this is clearly a prelude to war, even he knows that they should not be engaging in battle right now, why would the prince issue such command? Having yet to speak up in persuasion, he can already see Ye Li's ashen face filled with malicious and insidious, murderous intent flowing out, if anyone were to get any closer to him they will be harmed, thinking over and over again, he eventually shuts his mouth, heading off to convey orders.

Not long after, at a place thirty li from Yu Xia Guan, the Nu Tribe's military camp has already been built, under their watchful eyes, one can see half of the surrounding wilderness.

News of the hostility very quickly spreads to Yu Xia Guan.

Inside the military camp within Yu Xia Guan, the heat of summer has already arrived, because this location is close to the north, the summer heat does not seem to leave any traces here. Outside a tent, stands two handsome men, the young general in an armour of feather white passes the military report in hand to Lou Che whose faint smile like the wind.

Lightly skimming through the content of the military report, Lou Che appears completely unconcerned, in a body of green silk clothing, coupled with his handsomely elegant appearance, he looks just like a noble gentleman taking a stroll on the military grounds.

"Is this the emergency military situation?" A sarcastic laugh rings out from his mouth.

Lin Rui En takes back the military report, his calm tone not at all fluctuating: "Looks like the Nu Tribe seems to be planning to engage in battle."

The young prime minister laughs, within this fairly insolent laughter, there harbours a sense of ghastliness, "I believe that Nu Prince must have lost his calm."

"This time, the strength of their troops are not at all strong, the result of this battle is already set in stone." Thinking back to the sorry state Gui Wan was in after escaping from the Nu Tribe, he can vaguely guess the mystery behind it.

Remaining silent, Lou Che seems to be deep in thoughts, his refined and

elegantly handsome face still carrying a faint smile, such smile actually contains an air of incomparably dangerousness as well as emotionless coldness, "There is absolutely no need to engage in battle with them, it is better to simply have them shrink back in face of difficulties."

Not understanding why he would suddenly change his mind, Lin Rui En creases his brows, stating: "This is a great opportunity to annihilate them."

"I have my own way to make him retreat, there will always be another day, where we shall put an end to all this."

"Why should we wait for another opportunity? Is this not the most suitable opportunity right now?" Under absolute puzzlement, Lin Rui En was unable to hold back his questions.

"Although the Nu Tribe's current troops are incompetent, our country is also currently cultivating the country's power in this very moment, there is no need to deal with them anymore than we have to." Lou Che's smile deepens, looking to the skies, it is already time for Gui Wan to eat, he proudly strides towards the main tent. In the very moment he brushes passes Lin Rui En's shoulders, he says: "Moreover battling with them today, the one who will be defeating him will be General Lin you, that man, I want to personally defeat him myself."

[1] The original proverb used to refer to earnest is kǔ kǒu pó xīn / 苦口婆心 which literally translates to toughly spoken words from the old lady's heart, the toughly spoken words refers to patience and repeated persuasion, whilst the old lady's heart represent great kindness and goodwill. So the phrase itself is used to refer to someone who sincerely and patiently persuades through repeated attempts.

Aw poor general, his feelings are starting to get the best of him now, even the newly introduced characters Ran Yi and Lou Sheng have noticed it in that short moment, the general whose always been cold with an expressionless appearance is actually showing another side of him in front of Gui Wan...

Full



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Deluded Feelings

In heaven's recording of the second year summer, an urgent letter was sent to the Nu Capital from Yu Xia Guan, the Celestial Empire's Grand Secretary, Prime Minister Lou's handwritten letter was delivered to the Nu King, after Nu King spent some time reading through it, he sent for his second son Ye Li to be immediately summoned back to the Nu Capital, unfortunately Prince Ye Li was acting on his own will at the time, refusing to withdraw the troops, Nu King was furious, personally paying a visit to the Nu military camp outside Yu Xia Guan, kicking up a huge ruckus with Prince Ye Li, at the time, those who witnessed the scene outside the tent personally narrated, the historian truthfully reads the recording as follows:

Nu King extremely furious, swinging his palm right onto the prince's face, roaring out: "In this world, is there no other beauty to this Ye? For one woman, you recklessly resort to war, where has our great Nu's hundred generations of heritage gone to?"

Prince Ye Li was stunned, bitterly smiling as he answers: "The beauties of this world, what has it got to do with me? I need only think of the Lunar Goddess' one ear, as if I got it, all the beauties of the world reduces to naught."

Nu King was speechless, after a moment of silence, he seriously speaks: "If not the strongest, how are you to obtain the Lunar Goddess, if not the most honourable, how are you to protect the Lunar Goddess? If you want to obtain the Lunar Goddess, you must certainly first obtain the world."

Hearing this, Ye Li silently falls into a daze, half a day later, the troops retreated back to the Nu Capital.

Outside Yu Xia Guan, after the Nu troops have all retreated, there was once someone who passed on the words from outside the camp to Prime Minister Lou, jokingly asking: "The beauties of the world are many, why hold onto one person?"

Lou Che faintly smiles, answering as follows: "The beauties of the world are many like grass, only my wife Gui Wan, is the only one person in the world."

Only Gui Wan, is the only one person in the world.

Descendants later engraved this phrase onto a tablet, and in the autumn season of the same year, the Nu Tribe's Lunar Goddess Temple, carved out a stone statue of the Lunar Goddess, the Lunar Goddess' appearance was actually different to as described in the legend told throughout generations of the Nu

Tribe, with delicately beautiful facial features, similar to that of Celestial Empire women. As for Prince Ye Li, he is whole-heartedly concentrating on the state affairs and military situations, his heart void of any distractions.

This matter has been recorded as "Yu Xia Summer Turnover", planting the fuse for the later "Battle of the Jade Governor".

Lush green trees thickens the shade in this long summer day, image of the tower reflected in the pond. Crystal beaded curtains swaying in the gentle breeze, a full frame of roses, fragrant overflowing the entire courtyard.^[1]

Roses blooming in splendour, lush green trees casting shadows in the surrounding, outside Yu Xia Guan, the summer heat is scorching hot, a grand, strong team is ready to set off in return to the Capital.

Lou Che has already left the Capital for more than a month, the palace has urgently called for him several times, but all were ignored, as he accompanies Gui Wan in touring around places of great scenery and historical sites in Yu Xia Guan, up to this very moment, he has already reached a point where he can no longer delay his return to the Capital. As for Lin Rui En, because they have been hearing nothing from his older sister who went spying into the Nu Tribe, he had made his way here to Yu Xia Guan, right now, the Nu troops have already retreated, so having passed on matters regarding the city checkpoint over to Lin Ran Yi, he too is preparing to join them in returning to the Capital. Considering the matter of Gui Wan getting abducted, this time, the team is heavily guarded, large in scale and greatly vigorous.

The horse carriage has already changed into summer bamboo curtains, greatly ventilating and cool, Gui Wan sluggishly leans against the carriage frame, the scenery along the way looks as though it is flying past, only entering the eye very briefly. In a situation of extreme boredom, she sees Lou Sheng riding the horse absentmindedly, seeming to be in deep thoughts, struck by an idea, Gui Wan waves her hand, making Lou Sheng follow alongside the horse carriage.

"Madam." Riding his horse forward, Lou Sheng bows his head in show of respect, he is responsible for Gui Wan's safety, and dares not to show any negligence at any given moment.

"Your mind is occupied with troubled thoughts, are you thinking about Ran Yi?" Gui Wan laughingly says, having stayed at Yu Xia Guan for over a month's time, not only is it her who admires that woman as great as her male counterparts, even this stern Lou Sheng who's careful with his every word and smile, also have feelings for Lin Ran Yi.

Tightly sealing his lips, Lou Sheng's entire body stiffens, lowering his voice a few notches: "Madam must be joking. What position do I hold, towards a descendant of the Lin military family, how could I possibly dare deem myself worthy^[2]?"

Noting how his words were said not without lament and regret, Gui Wan lightly smiles, "Is this of your own narrow outlook? Didn't think that one as carefree and easy-going as her, also cannot be spared......" The last of her words sounding like a sigh, laced with an inaudible hint of light ridicule as it escapes her mouth.

Getting along with her for over a month, Lou Sheng already knows that the person inside the carriage's thinking and behaviour is different to that of the average women from elite official backgrounds, towards her, he holds a sense of deep respect, plus with her peerless elegance, she is naturally easy to get along with, a look of bitterness surfaces on his face as he says: "It is difficult to satisfy both sides in such worldly matters, so how could I possibly impose on such?"

"Impose?" Gui Wan softly mutters, her intuition tells her Lin Ran Yi may not necessarily hold no feelings, just that behind such feelings, is an entanglement of far too many external factors, and preparing to reveal it is difficult, leaving her in a helpless position.

Could it be that worldly matters are really up to mankind to propose a course of action, whilst success depends upon the will of the heavens?

Whilst the two of them were talking, the entire team gradually slows down, Lou Che and Lin Rui En turns around on their horses, one left one right arriving by the side of the horse carriage, Lou Che points to place ahead, saying: "There is a pavilion up ahead, in such hot weather, let us take little rest there."

Gui Wan follows the direction his finger points at, indeed a place of cool shade and peace, nodding her head in agreement, the team very quickly arrives at the pavilion, temporarily taking a break.

Entering the cool pavilion, they had yet to sit down, when they hear a burst of racket sound all around them, Gui Wan curiously looks back, the soldiers originally taking their own break outside the pavilion, were somewhat thrown into disorder at this moment, all surrounding one person, in this midsummer time, the person being surrounded was actually dressed in thick layers of winter clothes, with dishevelled hair, clearly a crazy woman, completely breaking out in madness, and is even muttering something constantly. Lin Rui En's soldiers are indeed well-trained, arranging themselves in neat rows, forming half a circle, neither allowing her to break in, nor causing her any harm.

Gui Wan carefully watches, this crazy woman is blind, disorderly bumping here, disorderly charging there, not even the slightest sense of direction. A soldier closest to the pavilion notices Gui Wan observing eyes, issuing a command: "Hurry and send this lunatic away, his excellency and madam still needs to rest."

The crazy woman upon hearing this command, loudly laughs out loud, yelling out: "Life is life, fate is fate, everyone else is drunk, only my heart alone is sober......you say I am crazy? Could it be that you are wide awake then? Hearing your sharp voice, yet your middle qi is insufficient, showing that you are outwardly strong inwardly weak, let me think, ah......I know now......you will certainly live a life of widowhood with no son......" After done speaking haltingly, she appears extremely excited and satisfied, laughing to herself, such crazy laughter neither high nor low diffusing into the air.

Hearing her crazy talk, no one else shows any reaction, yet that soldier's face pales, he himself clearly knows, he has a daughter right now, and his wife has just passed away last year. This crazy woman's every word has actually hit the bullseye, the soldier's mouth part, tongue knotted, unable to produce a single sound.

Lin Rui En frowns, waving once towards the outside of the pavilion, softly yelling out: "Give her some money, and let her go."

The soldiers had yet to accept the order, when that crazy woman suddenly quietens down, no longer disorderly bumping here, disorderly charging there, she quietly mutters a few words, inquiring: "Who is it? Who was it that spoke

just now? Why do you hold such air of vindictiveness? Prestige harboured within cold, vindictive air overflowing.....who is it?"

Once those few sentences left her mouth, the entire army was somewhat stunned, this crazy woman with her crazy talk, yet her every word hitting bullseye, freezing on the spot, they do not know what to do, Gui Wan could not help but to grin, waving her hand in signal, allowing the soldiers to disperse.

The crazy woman notices the surrounding resistance has disappeared, stumbling and colliding, staggering left and right, slowly waddling her way to the pavilion. Gui Wan pities her loss of vision in both eyes, making a nearby soldier go up to aid her, who would have known that the moment the crazy woman touched the soldier's hand, she would immediately throw it off, shadily letting out a grieving cold laugh as she says: "I'm not blind, you're the ones that are blind......just walk your own paths."

Charging her way to the front of the pavilion, she shakes her head all around, lowly saying: "The one who spoke just now, may you allow me to read your life? Give me your hand, I will read your bone....."

Lin Rui En has already been fighting in battlefields since young, towards such strange power of mystical talk, he has always paid no attention to it, his face remains cold as he utters not a single word.

Gui Wan was truly quite interested in this woman, once her childish side is worked up, she makes an eye signal, making Lou Sheng go up to offer his hand, Lou Sheng walks up, presenting his hand before the crazy woman, the crazy woman grabs it in one go, immediately ceasing the area below the wrist, both her hands filthy, grease stains all smeared onto Lou Sheng's hand, yet Lou Sheng did not even frown in the slightest bit.

"No.....no, he is not the one who spoke, you may also hold vindictiveness, but it definitely is not high and mighty, not suitable for a general." The crazy woman laments whilst ridiculing, "The one you love will definitely die for you.....half a lifetime as servant, dying all alone....."

Lou Sheng uncontrollably shows a change of expression, as pale white as paper, withdrawing his hand, he stops her from speaking anymore. That crazy woman does not mind, chuckling a few sounds. These few sounds of chuckling

travels into everyone's ears, all feeling as though it is stabbing into them, a bitter wind blows, shooting up from their backbones.

Lou Che sits in the left corner of the pavilion, his eyes keeping watch of the entire situation, gently waving his fan, he jokingly says: "Didn't think that this place also has such an odd character, to be able to identify heaven's will."

The crazy woman immediately turns her head towards the left corner, a face of absolute shock and disbelief, "An air of literary? Clear noble air of literary, why.....why is the air of literary and military alike appearing at the same time? What is this place?"

Up until this moment, Gui Wan gathers up her mood to watch the drama unfold, seriously observing this crazy woman stood in centre once again, lightly asking: "Since you are able to make divine readings of fate, how could you not make out where you are?"

The crazy woman suddenly speaks no longer, turning her head towards Gui Wan's direction, stilly staring as she stands there, not making a single move.

Although knowing her eyes cannot see, to be stared at by her like this, Gui Wan still finds it strange and unpredictable, Lou Che upon seeing this, was just about to call for someone to send the crazy woman away, when the crazy woman suddenly look as though her entire body is trembling, approaching Gui Wan, her quivering hand reaches out, murmuring: "Give me your hand, allow me to read your bone, speak, speak for me to listen to."

All the soldiers receives a huge fright, all looking towards the expressions of those inside the pavilion. Lou Che's face like spring breeze brushing against one's face, appears slightly displeased in this instant, Lin Rui En apart from looking surprise, watches Gui Wan, seeming worried.

Gui Wan was slightly stunned for a moment, turning her head in consideration, she bites her lip before prettily smiling, suddenly saying: "Alright, I shall allow you to make a reading."

Lou Sheng walks up, carefully eyeing the crazy woman, afraid that she would act outrageously, the crazy woman unsteadily extends her hand, placing it onto Gui Wan's wrist, the soldiers were all hit with a sense of being so appalled they could not bear to see the sight, Gui Wan's fair wrist like snow, is actually being

smeared with dirt and grease stains right now.

Pinch holding it for a long while, she suddenly kneels on the ground, heavily kowtowing, muttering: "......is a lady consort, a lady consort......phoenix entering Jiutian (nine skies division in heaven)......"

Every single person froze on the spot, the soldiers' faces filled with anxiety, no one dared to speak, Lou Che's face suddenly turns cold, the fan in hand closes with a swish, whacking it against the stone pillar of the pavilion, coldly saying: "What nonsense is this, come up, and send her out."

A harsh sound of barking, icily clear, freezing people, the soldiers hurries forward, was just about to pull that crazy woman away, but the crazy woman still kneels on the ground, muttering to herself: "You all don't believe it, don't believe it, how could there be such fate in this world? What fate is this......lady consort, definitely a lady consort......" Entangled in pushing and pulling with the soldiers inside the pavilion, she is unwilling to leave, her mouth continuing to call out, "Believe me, you are definitely fated to become a lady consort, everyone has their own fate, you cannot defy the heavens....."

Gui Wan also frowns, appearing unhappy, seeing that crazy woman continuously struggle, yelling and screaming, she stops the soldiers, her lips hooking up into a faint smile, she says to the crazy woman: "In your lifetime of reading fate, has there been any errors?"

"No, I will never make a wrong divine reading. There are many intricacies in fates within the world, heaven's will is as such, human doings cannot defy this......"

"Then it shall start from me," Gui Wan cuts off her long winded words, already slightly annoyed, resolutely saying, "I do not believe in your heaven's will, my life, is not up to others to decide on, my life is up to me and not the heavens, you got that?"

Once the crazy woman hears this, she does not dare to move, suddenly turning around, stumbling her way out as she heads off, a manic laughter emitted from her mouth, unstoppably repeating: "My life is up to me and not the heavens...... ha ha ha, so this is how it is, so this is how it is....."

Up until she was very far ahead, that insane laughing of hers still echoes into their ears continuously, high and low, hysterically wilful, shocking everyone there into slight unrest.

Lou Che's expression does not look too good, and Lin Rui En expression appears complex, originally a time of rest has become somewhat heavy and strange, after taking a rest, the team once again set off. Gui Wan having been troubled by that crazy woman, her heart was not feeling particularly pleasant, when walking out of the pavilion, she cannot help but to glance back, her eyes catching onto the plaque on top of the pavilion, lightly reading the words above: "Jun Mo Pavilion? This pavilion is called Jun Mo Pavilion?"

Jun Mo Pavilion.....gentlemen mustn't stop, could it be it was really wrong to stop here?

[Jūn mò tíng......jūn mò tíng / 君莫亭......君莫停 – Jun mo means gentlemen mustn't whilst the Chinese word for pavilion (tíng / 亭) is similar to that of the word stop (tíng / 停), an ironic name for a pavilion which is typically an ideal resting spot, yet the name of it serves as a warning for people not to stop here.]

- [1] It's been a while, but here comes another poem ^_^ ...<u>Summer Day At The Mountain Pavilion</u> by Gao Pian.
- [2] In the translated text above, I chose to use the words **deemed worthy** so that it flows better and makes more sense, the original words used were **gāo pān** / 高攀 which can be translated as **seeking or claiming connections to those** who are of a higher social position.

Interestingly, this Jun Mo Pavilion seems to have made its appearance in quite a few other c-novels aside from this one, along with the crazy woman, though I have no idea how it actually came about haha

A short chapter but with this very chapter, we can just put Ye Li behind us for now, the greater problems from hereon lies within the palace.....

Full



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Moved Feelings

The beauty of the Capital, is best reflected when the sun descends, a scenery of sunset glow, colourful and magically changing, particularly with the colour of red prominent, like the spreading of light ink in water, rendering half the sky, deep and heavy, breathtakingly spectacular, together with the grandeur of the tall red walls of the imperial palace, a display of extremely honourable glory, with the tallest Ning Kun Palace as focal point, extending a stretch into the net of Capital glory, within such solemnity, a trace of long honoured historical flavour is revealed, within such desolation, a display of profound influence overflows with the deeply rooted air of imperial power.

The descending sun like blood......

In the evening hours, having finally arrived at the Capital City, Gui Wan steps down from the horse carriage, looking into the distance at first glance, what she sees is the Capital City as such, her heart suddenly jumps, gazing into half a sky of rosy clouds, the bright red of the setting sun.

Unexpectedly, coming to welcome them at the eastern gates is actually Prince Duan and his party. In purple-gold python robes, jade belt and brocade boots, Prince Duan walks over in big strides, a friendly smile hung on his usually stern looking face, seeing Lou Che, Lin Rui En, he actually looks as though he has not seen his good friends for a long time, who could possibly think from seeing such passionate appearance that they each actually hold their own share of great power, and can become political enemies at any given time?

"Prime Minister Lou and General Lin has finally returned, without Prime Minister Lou and General Lin, this Capital City has practically gotten a little too cold and cheerless." Heartily laughing as he nears them, Prince Duan appears to be filled with a tremendous amount of lament.

"With Prince Duan here, how could the Capital possibly be cold and cheerless?" Such statement escapes his thin lips as though praising, as though ridiculing, Lou Che sits on the horseback, condescendingly looking down at Prince Duan.

Prince Duan acts as though he did not hear the tone hidden within his words, the smile on his face not at all faltering, he turns to Lin Rui En, "General Lin has worked hard, his majesty is singing high praises for you, General Lin truly does not fall short of being our country's rarely seen military talent."

The cold general indifferently nods his head, "I daren't be worthy."

Knowing that he is originally someone cold by nature, his overly simple use of four words does not bother Prince Duan at all, Prince Duan is talking cheerfully and humorously today, acting very friendly, he greets Gui Wan who had just gotten off the horse carriage: "Madam Lou's elegant demeanour remains the same, I am very fortunate indeed."

Gui Wan slightly performs a courteous bow in greeting, returning a smile, displaying impeccable etiquette and elegance, whilst hiding the shock of seeing Prince Duan's warm welcome, inevitably suspicious of his reason for coming here. Smiling as she looks away, she suddenly catches sight of a clear shadow within the accompanying officials. Having not seen this youth for over two months, he seems to have changed a lot, a humble attitude as he cautiously stands in a row of blue amongst the red official robes, against a background of stained red skies, all their faces seem to blur, sinking into the shadows of the sunset.

Prince Duan and Lou Che, Lin Rui En, the three people side by side as they head

into the imperial city, Gui Wan transfers to a simple horse carriage and follows behind, the rest of the government officials stands in waiting. Just when the carriage passes by the officials in rank order, the young first ranked scholar could not help but to look over, he looks into the carriage, face revealing a sincere smile, that sort of air of innocence and incisiveness once again returning to his body, refreshing just like the clear mountain springs.

He is still the youth from back then, thinking this, Gui Wan feels much more at ease.

In front of the city gates up ahead, the three most powerful men within the current imperial court discusses something as they walk, every so often Prince Duan's laughter like the cry of an eagle can be heard. Gui Wan looks askance at the three figures, finding it truly laughable, just when she was enjoying the individual looks on their faces, Prince Duan makes a sudden turn and heads towards her, pulling up the horse to the carriage side, laughingly say: "Madam Lou, excuse my rudeness, I shall be leaving first."

"Prince Duan's personal welcome, is already of the greatest of honour......
please walk slowly."

"Madam is too polite," Prince Duan's eagle eyes makes a turn, carrying interest, as he stares at Gui Wan, "I shall be looking forward to Madam's gracious presence in the palace within a day's time."

Rendered speechless for a moment, Gui Wan widens her eyes, before the last sentence even sunk in, Prince Duan had already left, laughing away.

She gazes towards the back with a sense of loss, Lou Che slowly walks up to her, as gentle as water, just as usual with no change, "Let us return home."

Radiant pearls, white jade bangle, extending her hand to fiddle with the jewellery, Gui Wan sits in front of the mirror, leaving Ling Long to comb her hair, the candle on the table flickers, wavering unsteadily, just like the current mood she is in.

Receiving Consort Ying's invitation, although unexpected, she was not actually surprised, a woman who is fragile to the extreme is also a type of danger, and

Yao Ying is undoubtedly a master in this. A shallow smile surfaces on her lips, Gui Wan softly laughs out loud.

Ling Long receives a shock, revealing puzzlement as she asks: "What are you laughing at?" Even though Gui Wan has already gotten married, she still hasn't been able to change her addressment.

"I'm laughing at, a woman's grief, a woman's sorrow, a woman's foolishness, such that pains people's heart but at the same time it also give rises to slight resentment ah." Gui Wan very casually strokes the ends of her hair, with unspeakable elegance and distinct air of refinement.

Ling Long was even more confused, she does not know who she is feeling sad for, but in this instance, she indeed feels her heart pained......deeply remembering Madam's unique way of teaching, the sort that took effect very subtly, unconsciously influential, bit by bit penetrating into the heart. Accepting an overly strong sense of self-protection and awareness, only when feelings have been moved would a slight crack emerge. Ah, did you know, the one who is truly pitiful and miserable is not someone else who is crazy in love, but is you who is equipped with a show of no emotions and only love yourself ah. (Ling Long is addressing Gui Wan's mother as Madam here)

Words that cannot possibly leave her lips, remains stuck in her heart, a sour feel rushes up to her eyes, in the heat of the moment, tears come rolling down.

Gui Wan doubtfully looks back, reaching out to catch those crystal tears, gently asking: "Ling Long, what's wrong?"

The tears rushes down more fiercely, Ling Long sobs, ".....could it be that you're not lonely? Why can you not give someone a chance? Why must you reject happiness?"

Questions accompanied by strings of tears, dripping into Gui Wan's heart. Heart like a mirror, suddenly seeing the light, her smile gradually widens, even the tip of her brows expresses her joy, Gui Wan laments: "To this day, I can truly feel your sincere concern and loyalty towards me." Reaching up to wipe away the trails of tears, quietly saying in a laughing manner, "Listen, these words I may only ever say once....."

The candlelight flickers around like an illusion on Gui Wan's face, weakening

Ling Long's consciousness, and only then did she notice, after not seeing her for over two months, Gui Wan seems to have changed. This is the most purest, most genuine smile she has ever seen from Gui Wan.

"Ling Long, I seem to have found the path to happiness."

Time suddenly stood still, Ling Long cried even more sorrowfully, but also showing a trace of laughter, a trace of bitterness, a trace of relief, a trace of joy.....

Ah, did you know, hearing those words from you, just how happy Ling Long also is ah

.....

After a long while, Gui Wan laughs and teases as she waits for Ling Long to organise herself. Ling Long very easily stops crying, and only then did she feel slightly embarrassed, gently laughing as she says: "Let's quickly doll you up, you still need to enter the palace."

Seeing her take out a set of ordinary palace outfit, paired with the silver silk ribbon, Gui Wan lowers her head in thinking, leisurely saying: "Today I won't be wearing this one." Standing up, she walks to the closet, selecting a set of robes, smoothly taking off her jewellery, before handing it to Ling Long to take a look, "Today I shall wear this set."

Staring dumbfounded at Gui Wan, Ling Long was speechless, absolutely surprised, others are desperate to display their beauty, as for her, her grace alone is a stroke above others, usually she would hide her beauty, that is why they never add much to her outfit, but what is going on today?

Just from looking at Ling Long's expression, she already knows what she is thinking, Gui Wan lightly purses her lips prettily, softly saying: "Today, waiting for my man, is the startling beauty, Consort Ying, the slightest of negligence, and I may very well lose."

No matter what, that delicate Consort Ying with heavenly grace has already evoked the competitiveness in Gui Wan's heart, the curtains to this war between women, is only just about to be drawn open.

Ling Long laughs, her laugh particularly cheerful, she really has changed,

before when she was as calm and light as the clouds and wind, she was of course beautiful, but right now, because of that additional sense of vigour, she is even more attractive, so much that others will not be able to lift their eyes from her.

On this summer day in the Capital City, it has already turned cold in the evening, in the elegantly beautiful imperial garden, even the air carries a sweet scent of fragrant grass. Right now the palace lanterns are hung high, the already extraordinary scenery of the garden in the morning, because of the lighting, has an additional touch of enjoyable fun within peaceful seclusion, and above the crystal clear pond, the water sparkles under the lighting of the palace lanterns, a beautiful atmosphere like a fantasy has been formed within this entire garden.

The palace maids are either holding the lanterns, or carrying plates, or respectfully standing there, shuttling around the imperial garden, serving every women of noble status within the courtyard, by the thicket of trees, sat at the stone table inside the jade veranda, light chuckles and shallow frowns, smooth and pleasant speech^[1], everywhere is overflowing with the cheerful chatting and laughter of women.

"Lady Consort Li, I see that you've been dazing off here the entire time, what are you thinking?" Thin robes exposing her shoulders, the speaker has an enchanting figure, extremely charming, her speech full of smiles as she approaches the beauty in a palace outfit, sitting by the pond.

Consort Li docilely raises her head, seeing the approaching person, she slowly stands, greeting: "So it's [Older] Sister Consort Yin ah, I only feel that this pond looks particularly beautiful at night, thus lost in admiration."

Sounding a few laughs, Consort Yin shows a look of awareness: "This pond indeed holds a different charm during night, but Consort Li.....is not actually infatuated with the scenery of this pond right?"

"Sister must be joking."

"Whether I am joking or not, Consort Li knows very well in your own heart, your mood, is it not the same as everyone else within this back palace?" Consort Yin is plain-spoken and straightforward, whatever she thinks she would

immediately blurt out, she sends Consort Li an eye signal, the corner of her lips casting towards the side, pointing towards the person stood in the heart of the garden.

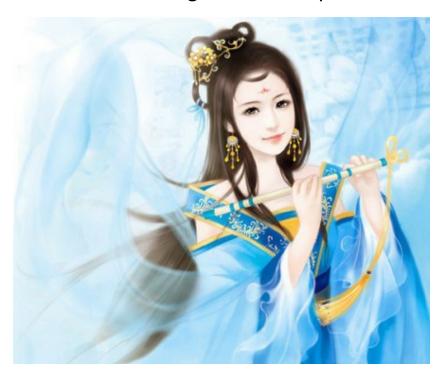
Consort Li follows her in looking, eyes also darkening, her original look of gentle grace, actually carrying a trace of distortion, a sort of resentment silently diffusing into the open air.

His majesty the Emperor once said: Obtaining the world is not the highest point of my life, obtaining Consort Ying has completed my lifelong aspiration.

Using those words to sum up Consort Ying's doted situation is not at all an exaggeration. Ever since Consort Ying entered the palace, the Emperor's eyes no longer held other people, towards the usual consorts this is natural, but even the Empress is not an exception.

"Such beauty like that, even the heavens and earth will be overshadowed by it ah." Consort Yin says, with both envy and jealousy, her tone ceasing to be relaxed, and instead every word deep and heavy.

Consort Li does not say anything after her, absentmindedly looking ahead. Consort Ying sits by the stone table, at the same table, other than the Empress, there are also a few women of the senior official families, and right now, all eyes seems to be set on Consort Ying alone, such glory equal to that of heaven and earth, making the other people on the table dejectedly overshadowed, the women in the entire garden are all put to shame.



The back palace is originally the palace of beauty, not one woman here is not beautiful, not one is not charming, this word beauty, is the most superficial thing in the back palace, and the Consort Ying before their eyes is no exception to this, her beauty can overthrow cities and ruin states, right now, dressed in a sheer light blue robe, six jade glazed hairpins holding up her hair, delicately beautiful, such beauty of extreme magnificence, swallows up all the glory within the back palace, within the absolute brilliance of six palaces, only one alone outshine others.

Just how much envy and jealousy such beauty draws out ah. Not to mention she had even obtained the Emperor's unrivalled love.

Heart twitching in pain, Consort Li reaches up to her chest, as though she cannot bear the bitterness in her heart, her face turns pale, not allowing her eyes to continue looking in that direction.

"Strange," Consort Yin mutters to herself, "Consort Ying seems to have deliberately dressed up today, does she enjoy pressuring the other fragrant flowers with her brilliance?"

Lowering her head to take a look at Consort Li's expression, Consort Yin smiles, not mentioning it anymore, and diverts to another topic: "Fortunately Consort Ying had a miscarriage, now the Empress can rise up from the east again, if not, Consort Ying cannot possibly be suppressed."

Only when she listened up until this point, did she show a little reaction, Consort Li reveals a trace of doubt, "I heard that students across the world submitted a written petition to his majesty, and only then did his majesty restore the Empress' legitimate power?"

"That's right, I heard that ballads were circulating around the commoners, the students petitioned one after another, pressure from the outside is all very great ah." To hear such news, she inevitably felt rather delighted in the misfortune of others, secretly pleased.

"But, it isn't able to cause Consort Ying any harm right? I just get this feeling there's someone secretly helping her." A good few times, such power from the outside has interfered with the back palace, and in such situation where no one catches sight of the slightest trace of the shadow, there is always someone who

protects Consort Ying.

Not hearing Consort Li's words, Consort Yin stares ahead in full concentration, her mouth mumbling in intrigue: "Strange....."

"Exactly what is strange?" Hearing her continuously mention the word strange, Consort Li also becomes curious.

"Could it be that you can't sense Consort Ying's difference in behaviour today? Her heart is not here, occasionally glancing towards the entrance, as though she's waiting for someone."

"Is that so?" Unable to hold back her gaze from looking over there once again.

Those close to the stone table can all sense Consort Ying's abnormality, inadvertently revealing a slight show of nervousness, just when they were all surprised by this, a sound of "Prime Minister Lou's Madam has arrived—" penetrates the air from the entrance, the usually firm and stable voice of announcement is actually trembling a little when loudly calling out.

Consort Ying is abruptly startled, turning her gaze, tightening her grip on the cup in hand. Everyone follows her actions and simultaneously looks over towards the entrance.



This is the first time the gathering of women has seen someone of Consort Ying's equal. Gui Wan leisurely walks up, in a black outer robe with high lapel and wide sleeves, adorned with bright red embroidery patterns, the obscure embroidering on the outfit like the lights of fireflies, the fine threads of silk

twisting and turning, a body of flowing patterns seemingly alive. Her hair held up in a string of finely divided pearls, emitting faint rings of glow, scattering onto her silky black hair, such fusion with her beauty results in an extremely charming demeanour, appearing devilishly glamourous, bewitchingly beautiful, an extremely unique charm.

After this matter, when those that were present were asked about the two people's charms, they could not possibly describe it, and said as follows: Consort Ying's beauty, is of great magnificence, delicately pretty, a charm that makes others cannot help but to feel tender towards her, beautiful to such extent that brings people to tears; Gui Wan's beauty, is of pure essence, bewitchingly beautiful, such devilish force of attractiveness makes people sink into intoxication.

"So it is......Madam Lou who has come." Standing up, Consort Ying delivers her greeting, the words Madam Lou seemingly difficult to push out of her mouth.

"Greetings your highnesses." Paying her formal respects, Gui Wan's light smile like an orchid.

Only at this very moment were all those present struck by a breathtaking sensation, simultaneously looking at Gui Wan, then also looking at Consort Ying, not one of them were untaken by shortness of breath after such lamentations.

In this moment, the Empress also reveals a rejoicing smile, hurriedly standing up as she pulls Gui Wan along to take a seat. The people seated there one by one comes forward in greeting, the atmosphere seething with excitement all over again. Her first time sitting at the same table with Consort Ying, Gui Wan did not feel constrained at all, whilst conversing about topics that concerns all women, the time flows by bit by bit.

Up until the reporting officer once again comes forth to notify them the banquet is about to begin, the women once again grows delighted, making their way to the banquet hall in an orderly manner, only the table with Consort Ying did not make a single move.

The Empress stands up first, calling out: "His majesty and hundred officials are waiting, let us make our way over to the front hall now." Replies are sounded and the few people at this table stands, making their way out. Gui Wan stands

up, was just about to trail behind, when her wrist was held back, upon turning her head, she is greeted by Consort Ying's pair of exceptionally gentle eyes: "Madam Lou, may you accompany me for a walk."

The Empress hears this, and looks back in surprise, yet Gui Wan only presses her lips together, carrying a thin smile as she nods in agreement.

Seeing Gui Wan's appeasing smile, the Empress is relieved, leaving at ease.

Only the two are left within the garden, after a while, Consort Ying gracefully stands, starting to make her way out, Gui Wan silently follows after her. The two of them walks side by side on this long path in the palace, palace maids and eunuchs following them at a distance. An entourage of people walking at an incredibly slow speed.

"Can you guess how long it takes to finish walking this path?" Consort Ying who was silent all the way suddenly speaks up, her gentle voice lightly asking the person beside her.

Already thinking that she would not say anything, Gui Wan glances into the distance, under the evening skies, she cannot see the end, shaking her head, she says: "Not sure."

"I walk this path every day, thus knowing that this road requires the time to drink half a pot of tea to get there, and the time to drink a full pot of tea to head back."

Gui Wan indifferently smiles without responding, knowing full well that there must be a reason behind her words.

"You really are tolerant, are you not going to ask? Why this same path, getting there and back, why would the timing be different?" Consort Ying side eyes her, within those eyes with tenderness like water, a sorrowful coldness flows out, "That is because, when I'm heading there, I want to get one look of him, so I walk particularly fast, when I'm heading back, I'm absolutely reluctant to leave, my walking speed thus naturally slows."

"Lady Consort's affections runs deep, ties highly valued, such rarity is truly commendable."

"You know who I am talking about, why are you still this calm?" Her voice

raises a few notches, seeming to be very unsatisfied with Gui Wan's reaction.

Gui Wan turns her head, acting in a pensive manner, giving an irrelevant answer: "The magnificence of the imperial palace is extraordinary, since Lady Consort has already married into the palace, why not cherish what you have, why must you bitterly struggle to grasp onto the past?"

Consort Ying upon hearing this, is slightly stunned, suddenly laughing out loud, an astringent taste hidden in her laughter, "You think those words can possibly affect me? Had I wanted to let go of the past, I would never have suffered for so long."

"Not able to let go, also not able to be happy, Consort Ying is also living it tough."

Suddenly stopping in her steps, Consort Ying doubtfully turns her head, eyes set on Gui Wan, delicately asking: "If so, are you willing to give this woman living a tough life a helping hand?"

Revealing a smile carrying a trace of ridicule, Gui Wan plays along saying: "Excuse my rudeness, but I really cannot see, how Lady Consort's life is tough. Even if I can, I also do not have the ability to solve Lady Consort's troubles."

An expression of disappointment gradually emerges, and then immediately appears serious again, Consort Ying says: "You are being too modest, your tactics are truly superior, the average person cannot even reach there, the student petitioning a month ago, was it not your doing?"

Didn't think she would actually mention this matter, originally she did not think that she could hide this since the very start, readily embracing Consort Ying's critique, Gui Wan laughs it off.

Absolutely unable to accept such calm and open attitude from Gui Wan, Consort Ying frowns, "I do not know why you are helping the Empress, but it will only happen just this once. From henceforth, Lou Che would also not let you do this."

"Is that so? If it is like this, then why should Lady Consort be so alarmed?" The wind raises her black hair, Gui Wan gently strokes her long hair, because of being pressed harder and harder by Consort Ying, she was feeling slightly impatient.

"This thing called feelings changes accordingly to the surrounding environment, but feelings toughened throughout many years of trials, even though there will be many ups and downs, the fundamental essence will not be changed, do you believe this?"

The meaning strongly implied.

"I believe it." Gui Wan leisurely replies, pointing to the large doors of the palace hall in front, the luxuriously jade green lighting leaking out from within, seemingly waiting for the late arrival of the two guests, "Lady Consort, we have arrived."

Eyes slightly dimming, Consort Ying stands on the spot motionless.

"Lady Consort, no matter how long the path is, there will always be a time you reach the end, let us go in now."

"I will not give up....." Towards Gui Wan, she looks at the bright lights ahead, Consort Ying speaks as though she is making an oath, "I have missed the opportunity once, I will not miss it the second time." Throwing aside those words, she walks forward, this time not having the slightest of hesitation.

Watching the back of her figure walking into the light and shade, Gui Wan quietly sighs, "Such foolish love, makes people pity and hate ah." Raising her foot, she follows into the noisy and vibrant main hall.

The brilliance within large hall is casted upon the two figures, within that moment, the banquet, originally a mix of all kinds of liveliness is rendered into a moment of pause, all eyes of hundreds of civil and military officials locks onto those two figures. There were even those who immediately recognised Gui Wan as the Nu prince's person in the painting, absolutely struck with shock, dumbly stunned on the spot.

Since Gui Wan entered, Guan Xiu Wen seems to have lost his senses, never has he thought, Gui Wan's beauty, is so directly displayed in front of people, a unique charm that captures your soul and sucks it in, under the rendering of the lighting, her charms infinitely expanding. Suddenly waking himself up, recalling the last time when his own infatuated state was discovered by Prince Duan, thus

allowing himself to be grabbed by the handle, he hurriedly fixes his expression, still rather unassured, he turns his head to look towards the right, greeting him was actually the sight of Prince Duan swaying the jade cup in hand, his eyes appearing enchanted, Guan Xiu Wen was secretly surprised, could it be that he also.....upon careful inspection, joy quietly rises within his heart, the one Prince Duan is looking at, is clearly Consort Ying, so this is how it is, Prince Duan ah Prince Duan, not until this very moment, did I know, we can be allies. Unable to hold it in, soft laughter is sounded, one point of intoxication, three points of frivolous attitude.

Finally walking into the middle of the palace hall, Consort Ying walks up the steps towards the imperial seats, Gui Wan walks a few steps to the left.

Sitting in the banquet, Lou Che lightly takes a sip of the fine wine, it is said that this newly brewed wine has a name, called "Demoness", clean and mellow upon first taste, the aftertaste very strong, making the people consuming it, unknowingly sink into intoxication, he has never gotten drunk before, continuously drinking three mouthfuls, faintly smiling as he watches Gui Wan walk over. In a moment of haziness, his line of sight is locked onto her, his pupils darkening, the alcohol effect slowly spreading, seeping into all areas of his body^[2], his chest in particular, burning all the way up to his brain, all the surrounding sounds suddenly vanishes, only leaving behind that touch of enchantingly beautiful view, surpassing every spring scenery this world has to offer.

The imperial palace's world is separate from that of the outside, the magnificence here, blurred, the sounds, the vibe, the emotions, delicately dispirited, all that is detached from worldly norms, exuding of sinful sweetness, luring people into walking past the gates of moral boundaries.

Amongst the hundreds of officials in the banquet, a literary man gently sways the feather fan in hand, with a small smile, he shakes his head, quietly lamenting: "The country's source of misfortune, didn't think that there's actually two of them." He downs a big mouthful of wine.

"General." Lowering his voice as he calls out to the person besides him, only to find that Lin Rui En ears are deaf to him, his eyes lax, complicated as though

hundreds of feelings have gathered. The literary man desolately smiles, his words mainly spoken out of ridicule, "General, have you forgotten, I have once said, if a woman's beauty is used as a weapon, then that shall be a frightening matter, what it leads to will definitely be tragedy."

His body stunned, Lin Rui En turns his head, a look of shame emerging, as he bitterly laughs: "Military Advisor's reminder is correct, I have learnt my lesson." Not daring to rest his eyes on that face again, he sits up straight.

"Your majesty." A long drawn out voice attracts all attention to the spot next to the imperial throne, all the officials raises their heads, looking towards the direction of the Empress.

Gracefully performing a light bow, the Empress may not have such stunning beauty that can overthrow cities like Gui Wan and Consort Ying, but she too is a beauty amongst the million, such demeanour with tranquillity within elegance, differs from the average women, naturally giving off a sense of dignity and grace, she speaks up saying: "Your majesty, I hold great admiration towards Madam Lou's grace, is it possible to have her seated with me?"

In respect, the Empress originally comes first in the back palace, even the accompanying female partners of the officials have precedents, the Emperor smiles in a cultured and refined manner, was just about to nod his head, when suddenly the first table on the left sounds a sharp response: "No."

A stern rejection, the entire place thrown into an uproar, all officials stops what they are doing, looking at the imperial court's Grand Secretary.

Lou Che looks at the Empress, his tone eased: "I thank your highness for such good intentions, unfortunately Gui Wan's body is weak, too inconvenient to take care of your highness, please pardon my offense." His words says to pardon his offense, yet his attitude shows not an ounce of intention to give way.

The Empress was rather surprised, but did not show this on her face, "It is I who was thoughtless." Lou Che holds legitimate power, even the Emperor has to back down a few points in face of him, so why would she hold something against him over such a small matter?

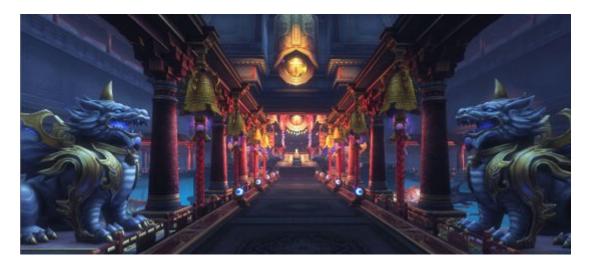
Although it comes to no surprise that things ended this way, but this matter has still given the hundreds of officials a slight fright, towards Lou Che's actions

today, they are rather puzzled. Although he holds great power, Lou Che would usually never have any clashes with the imperial family, and definitely would not use his power as a threat, so today, why would he outright oppose the Empress who had only just regained her phoenix seal over such a small matter?

Only Lin Rui En was able to vaguely guess Lou Che's thinking, although monarch and his subjects share the same happiness, those jade steps to the imperial seating is a boundary line, setting foot on those jade steps, is the monarch, standing below the steps, is thus the subject. No matter how much power Lou Che holds, it is still impossible for him to walk past that threshold, that is not an ordinary boundary line, that is a gap that cannot be passed. Today's matter, if it were to happen in the past, Gui Wan sitting next the Empress will not be a matter of great significance, but after experiencing the scene at Jun Mo Pavilion, Lou Che will definitely never let Gui Wan set foot onto those jade steps no matter what.

One hand holding the cup, one hand gently holding Gui Wan's hand under the table, Lou Che adjusts his breathing, calming his somewhat chaotic mind-set, eyes hidden with chilliness as he looks upward, gently turning the wine cup in his hand, what was that just now? Upon thinking of Gui Wan setting foot on those jade steps, he was immediately struck with uncontrollable rage and fear, slightly tightening his hold on Gui Wan's hand, feeling that tonight really has been a mess, did he drink too much wine?

An ordinary banquet because of a very small episode in between, actually becomes a situation like a hidden tide surging up, even with the singing and dancing entertainment, all those within this banquet were passing on witty remarks one by one^[3], unable to conceal the air of back palace dispute above those jade steps, along with the underlying turbulence within the political situation below those steps.



"Li gong-gong, you go wait ahead in Jin Xiang Hall, I and Madam Lou have things to talk about." Standing under the evening skies, the Empress turns back to order the eunuch beside her.

Such chubby face extremely glossy, in the moment he raises his eyes, a look of surprise flashes by, taking a step back, he respectfully says: "Yes, your highness." Leaving ahead, not long after, he turns a corner and enters another palace hall.

Gui Wan looks towards the Empress who deliberately kept a distance from the palace maids, gently asking: "Is there something troubling you?"

"This imperial palace is originally a place filled with rights and wrongs, not a day of peace and order." A tender-hearted tone, even the Empress' smile carries a few points of exhaustion, unfortunately it is consumed by the darkness, and thus hidden away just like that.

"That's why you need be careful to such extent, even a simple conversation requires guarding against all people?" Gui Wan reveals a glimmer of a slightly satirical smile, within this air of indifference, such shady gentleness is unpredictable.

"You think I want to be like this?" The Empress slowly starts walking, looking at the cold and cheerless palace path after the dispersing of the banquet, carrying a trace of feeling like that of tea cooling down once the people are gone^[4], "Did you know, the Li gong-gong just now is a pair of eyes your husband planted beside me, if I hadn't sent him away, I'm afraid our conversation today, will be a passing message, and will have faithfully reached the Prime Minister Estate tomorrow. As for the palace maids here, I also do not know who I am to trust."

Suddenly as though they entered deep into darkness, a scene of still silence

befalls them, only after a long while later, did Gui Wan sadly speak up: "You already regained control of the phoenix seal, why is each step still so difficult to take?"

"Phoenix seal is a lifeless object, without legitimate power, what can you possibly do, within this palace, following red to top white^[5] is but a common case, a phoenix headdress without legitimate power, how is it any different to any ordinary headdress?" A sorrowful sigh, the mother of this country tells of the hidden dangers within the palace, within the darkness, Gui Wan's expression cannot be clearly seen, nor does it seem like she will speak up in response, gloomily smiling, "To be able to regain this phoenix seal in my hands, is already extremely fortunate, I have yet to say a word of thanks to you."

Footsteps suddenly coming to a stop, a pair of jade-like fine hands reaches out to the Empress' cheeks, gently brushing it, catching a droplet of hot teardrop, Gui Wan speaks as though she's sighing: "Why shed tears?"

Extending her hand to grab onto Gui Wan's, the Empress is unable to suppress the surge of emotions, voicing it out: "[Little] Sister, in this back palace, I can no longer sleep peacefully."

During such still and silent night, Gui Wan hears a dozen paces, the noise of the candles burning inside the lanterns outside the palace, a stimulating hissing sound, making her heart feel a chill upon hearing it, pulling out her hand from the Empress' warm palms, indifferently saying: "If you want peaceful sleep, first calm your own heart, overly unreasonable demands, will only put yourself at unease."

The Empress bitterly laughs out loud, an astringent taste spreading out, sorrowfully sayings: "Gui Wan, I am already a mother, please be considerate of my feelings, even if it is not for myself, I still need to fight a war for the child ah, who let him be born in the imperial family? His majesty only dotes on Consort Ying alone, no longer does he visit the other consorts anymore, even if she had a miscarriage this time, what about in future? Who can possibly guarantee future happenings?" The hurriedly spoken words seems as though it is affirming something.

That word of "little sister" just now, who knows how much sincere affection it

truly held, Gui Wan brushes it off with a smile, yet with this word of "Gui Wan" right now, she is unable to remain indifferent to it, this tone is extremely similar to her mother's. Their expressions cannot be clearly seen within this darkness, further giving her a sense of misconception, a sound of lament disperses from the bottom of her heart, this sound of calling has touched her broken heart.

"Gui Wan?" Thinking she did not hear clearly, the Empress gently calls out once again.

"Alright, you are only lacking legitimate power in the back palace right now." Throwing back her sleeves with a sway, Gui Wan once again starts pacing forward, elegant steps making not a sound within the dark, "Rest assured, even if you do not say it, I will still help you."

The Empress follows up, wanting to say a word of gratitude, but then thinks it will insult Gui Wan, and could only swallow back her intended words, discarding it into the darkness.

The two people accompany each other without a word, after a while of walking, they can already see a side hall, brightly lit, with sound of voices, the two of them stops and looks over.

Looking for a long time, Gui Wan smiles, lightly asking the Empress: "Who are those two consorts?"

"Consort Li and Consort Yin, I heard that their ancestors were relatives, so they often accompany one another within the palace." Thinking back to the past, with one elegant, one charming, the Emperor was extremely fond of them, but now they too have fallen to the lonely fate of guarding their palace halls.

Gui Wan's faint smile like a plum blossom, carefully observing for a while, she suddenly laments: "Within this imperial palace, everyone here is quite the character."

"This Consort Yin is plain-spoken and straightforward, not at all one to get bored of, just that being able to survive in this back palace, is also not an easy task; that Consort Li is fragile and kind-hearted, has not gone through any particular ups and downs within the palace." One by one explaining to Gui Wan, in great detail. The Empress turns her head, only to find that Gui Wan did not even seem to be listening, just staring ahead.

"Who is that eunuch?" A jade finger extends, Gui Wan points ahead at the eunuch in purple that is rushing around, she turns her head and pulls a consulting expression.

The Empress glances over, but was not able to recognise him, presumably a little known figure within the ranks of eunuchs, just when she was thinking this, the personal maid by her side speaks up: "That is De Yu, Madam Lou."

"Oh?" Gui Wan slightly raises her brows, appearing rather interested, signalling for the palace maid to continue speaking.

"De Yu seems to have entered the palace at the age of fourteen, runs errands in Yu Gan Hall, already been in the palace for ten years, it is said that he too is born from a scholarly household, but the family is too poor, he is typically good with economizing, always sending his monthly salary back home, providing his younger brothers and sisters with living expenses." The palace maid tells everything to the best of her knowledge, De Yu may be a low ranked eunuch, but has a delicate appearance with bright eyes and graceful brows, and gets along well with others, the palace maids are all very happy to be of help to him.

Gui Wan reveals a shadow of a smile, raising her head to look at the pitch black sky, not a single star in sight, slightly disappointed, she turns back saying: "Your highness, please remain, just have this De Yu to lead the rest of the road for me."

The Empress gently nods, although she does not know why she would suddenly take interest in this little eunuch, she does not ask about it, allowing the palace maid beside her to go call for him, she observes Gui Wan saying: "Are you disappointed? To think that I am actually one who would also do whatever I have to in struggle for power."

Hearing this, Gui Wan's eyes lands on the Empress, suddenly finding, she seems to have truly gotten thinner, smiling in understanding, she leisurely says: "Of wealth and power, who can possibly remain indifferent to it? I have no right to judge you, just put your mind at ease now."

Hearing these words of hers, the Empress' conscience seems as though it had received redemption, the thorn pricking at her heart also disappears, softly mewling: "Gui Wan....." Seeing the palace maid that had left, come jogging over with the little eunuch in purple, she hurriedly lifts her sleeve to cover her face,

masking her loss of bearings.

The palace maid and De Yu draws close, he first bows at the Empress, before greeting Gui Wan, indeed a gentle and well refined appearance.

From the side palace hall to the palace path where the horse carriage is parked, the distance is neither far nor close, De Yu uprightly leads the way through this stone path in the dark, feeling a little puzzled inside, he does not understand why this Madam Lou wants for him to lead the way, he dares not be rude, carefully, warily attending to her.

"How long have you been in the palace?" A long drawn out voice sounding particularly prominent in this heavily gloomy night, as though it can seep in the bottom of his heart.

His steps does not falter, still maintaining the same walking speed as he answers: "It's been ten years."

"Is your family living well? It should be about time your younger brothers and sisters get married off right?" Gui Wan soft questioning contains a smile, even this somewhat chilly passage also warms up a bit due to those words.

Unable to help but to slow down his pace, De Yu has clearly been stunned, followed by respectful bow as he says: "I thank Madam for your concern, they are all well."

Gently sounding a sigh, Gui Wan's eyes gazes out, overflowing with feelings, seeming as though her heart is wrapped in distress, De Yu raises his head and just happens to see this, his heart slightly shook, not knowing why, he suddenly really wants to ask her, is there something making her unhappy, such impulse is literally being suppressed in his heart, whilst cold sweat is oozing out of him. In the grand hall, he has already witnessed this Madam Lou carrying a devilish charm of breathtakingly beautiful elegance, only when facing it right now, did he come to realise just how captivating it is. His six roots have already been cleaned out^[6], cannot be considered a man, but he still holds a certain sense that feels as though it is being affected by her.

His intuition from being in the palace for many years tells him, this matter is very strange, hastily taking a step back, he lowers his head respectfully.

Looking at him filled with praises, Gui Wan secretly gives him a pass, she has indeed found the right person, seeing him run around the side hall just now, very methodological, agile and manoeuvrable, she immediately know this person's thinking is very thorough but closed, smart and alert; looking at it now, he is still very cautious and wary, indeed a great talent. Gently laughing, she sweetly says: "Entering the palace for ten years, yet you are still a little eunuch, do you not find it unjust?"

Not waiting for him, Gui Wan continues to speak: "As long as you are able to gain power within the palace, you can become more reliable to your family, could it be that this was not your original intention when you first entered the palace? Li gong-gong upon receiving my husband's recognition, already became a head eunuch within a short number of years, could it be that you do not want to ascend to the sky in one step?"

This voice originally has a leisurely tone that soothes the heart, upon entering the ears, one naturally feel as though their heart is lightly floating. De Yu panics, reminding himself that he must never be stirred, the fierceness of palace disputes is not something the average person can withstand, when raising his eyes, he suddenly sees Gui Wan's body shake, seeming to be at discomfort, he could not help but to reach out to support her, gently holding onto Gui Wan's wrist, feeling something warm and smooth within the grip of his hand, in a moment of coldness, something slides off Gui Wan's hand, and his own hand receives an additional item, borrowing the dim palace lanterns to take a careful look, he sees a string of pearl bracelet, his pair of penetrating eyes that have been refined throughout his years in the palace, immediately recognises at one glance, this is a highly valued treasure.

"De Yu gong-gong, I and the Empress share a bond like that of sisters, she alone in the palace, is lonely and helpless, may I request of gong-gong to take good care of her." Having said that, Gui Wan actually performs a gentle bow, not giving him the chance to return the bracelet.

How could De Yu possibly dare to accept such a big gift, panicking, he painfully struggles with himself inside. His family is in an impoverished situation, for the family's livelihood, he sold away his entire life, right now, could it be that he has to sell his soul for riches? The pearl bracelet in hand still carries the Gui Wan's

warmth, spreading out from his palm, and at the same time it warms up his heart, but also pricks at him. Looking at the graceful woman in front, he knows she adopts tactics that are both tough and soft, and also uses psychological tactics, faintly sighing, only saying in his heart: whatever, just let the soul sink into this lonely darkness.

"Madam Lou, if you have any orders just speak directly." Even his voice has toughened up a few points due to his determination.

Her eyes like flowing waves, Gui Wan sweetly smiles, filled with a unique charm, peerlessly stunning beauty, "Gong-gong, remember today's matter cannot be known to a second person, in future gong-gong will naturally go through a meteoric rise, make sure to look after the Empress in the palace, other matters happening in the palace you can immediately report to me, especially......" Her words coming to a pause, she follows on saying, "I think gonggong should be very clear."

De Yu is a very smart person, a little point easily gets through to him, nodding in agreement.

"Gong-gong, the most important thing, you must absolutely not forget, this matter cannot be known to Prime Minister Lou."

Slightly stunned, De Yu looks at her, thinking for a bit, he clenches the bracelet in hand, resolutely nodding his head.

Having finished speaking, the two people continues forward as if nothing happened, but the surrounding mood is quite complicated, De Yu's steps were all somewhat heavy, Gui Wan remains wordless, up until the outside of the side hall, where they see the horse carriage, Gui Wan turns back with a smile, saying: "Thank you gong-gong for seeing me all the way here, Gui Wan is very grateful."

Knowing her words of gratitude is pointing towards something else, De Yu silently accepts it, watching as Gui Wan walks far ahead.

"Why are you so late, did the Empress pull you off to speak again?" Lou Che stands beside the carriage, his gently moist eyes carrying a hint of tipsiness, his feelings faintly flowing out.

Gui Wan comes closer and closer, yet the smile on her face slowly fades,

replacing it is a sort of loneliness and stillness, making Lou Che panic upon seeing it, hurriedly asking: "What's going on?"

Not answering his question, she asks back: "Lord Husband, do you know what kind of place the back palace is?"

"What kind of place is it?" This woman ah, always has unpredictable behaviour patterns.

A very soft and light laughter spreads, Gui Wan laughingly says: "This is a women's place, a place men cannot interfere with, a place where all the problems are up to the women to solve, you know that?"

Lou Che was speechless, not knowing what to say in response, faintly feeling uneasy deep in his heart.

Smile faintly disappearing from her lips, Gui Wan eyes rolls to the side, looking towards the direction she came from, appearing very helpless, she softly asks: "Clearly knowing not to but still resorting to such, calling it 'courage', clearly knowing not to but still resorting to such, what it should be called, do you know?"

Lou Che's heart slightly throbs, reaching out to gently hold onto Gui Wan's shoulder, knowing her heart is met with troubles, he had yet to comfort her, when Gui Wan raises her head, her eyes like water, deeply secluded, softly saying: "That is called 'sin'."

"I today, must have committed an unforgivable sin."

The act of enticing another into committing a sin, houses a more sinful sin.

- [1] **Smooth and pleasant speech** particularly women's speech, is described with the phrase **yīng shēng yàn yǔ /** 莺声燕语 which translates to **sounds of orioles and tones of swallows**, basically saying that their talking is like the singing of these birds.
- [2] The phrase used to refer to one's **entire body** here, is more specific in Chinese **sì zhī bǎi hái /** 四肢百骸 as it literally translates to the **four limbs, hundred bones**.
 - [3] The original phrase for passing on witty remark one by one is miào yǔ lián

zhū/妙语连珠 which literally translates to witty remarks stringed together like pearl beads.

- [4] **Tea cool down once the people are gone** or **rén zǒu chá liang /** 人走茶凉 refers to the **superficiality of human relationships**
- [5] Following red to top white or gēn hóng dǐng bái / 跟红顶白 is an expression of the attitude of survival intelligence where people follow those in power to avoid danger, with red representing the winner and white representing loser.
- [6] **Six roots all cleaned out** or **Liù gēn jù jìng /** 六根俱净 means all six roots of human senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind) are pure and clean, and is thus **free from human desires and passion.**

It seems like I made quite a few of you a little muddled up after bringing up the Emperor Swallow Stick in the comments section of the previous chapter, so I'll just drop a few reminders and notes here:

The emperor swallow stick is a stick drawn from kau chim – which is a fortune telling method that works like drawing lots [more info: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kau_cim]

In chapter one, both Gui Wan and Yao Ying went to kau chim and both drew out the emperor swallow stick, Yao Ying went on to become the most doted imperial consort whilst Gui Wan married Lou Che, despite the suggestive sign that those who draw this stick is to become the emperor's woman

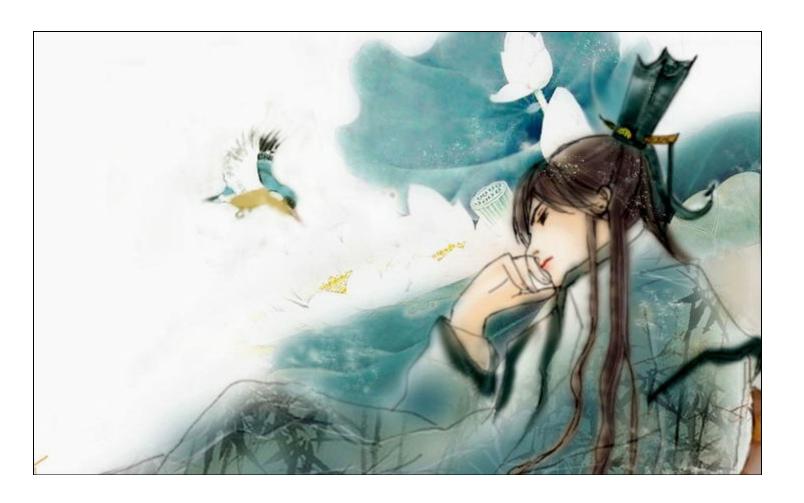
Note that the Emperor is not informed of who has drawn the emperor swallow stick, in fact, he may not even know of the stick's existence.

The stick itself represents the women's fate to become the emperor's woman, so the emperor making them his consort, can only be said to be fate

Of course Lou Che is not aware that Gui Wan had also drawn this stick but the divine reading of the crazy woman alone, has already made him wary of Gui Wan stepping any where close to the emperor hehe

hope that I cleared things up a bit, if anyone is still confused about anything, feel free to ask

Part 1



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Storm In The Back Palace (Part One)

Clearly knowing not to but still resorting to such, calling it "courage", clearly knowing not to but still resorting to such, what it should be called, do you know?

It is called "sin"......

Lou Che places down the brush in hand, gazing down at the official document on the desk, his thinking somewhat blank, constantly thinking back to that night they returned from the palace, those vague words of Gui Wan's. A bundle of irritation shoots up his heart, and with a sound of "pa—" the document is slammed shut, he closes his eyes, entering deep thoughts, but is disrupted with a wave of hurried steps, gradually closing in from afar, coming to a sudden stop outside the door.

"My lord?" The old housekeeper sounding a little breathless, tentatively calls

out.

His eyelids doesn't lift in the slightest, silent to the point it seemed like he heard nothing, after a while, Lou Che slowly opens his eyes, "What's the matter?"

"My lord, outside, the Imperial Physician Hall's Qing Xun, Lord Qin is requesting an audience." The housekeeper's tone is still as courteous and respectful as ever, a long waiting time has already become a custom.

The corner of his lips hooking up, tracing a playful smile, Lou Che deeply emits a laughing tone: "Did he say what it's about?"

"My lord, he says there's an extremely important matter to report." His master's thoughts and mood has always been very difficult to make out, but according to a decade of serving experience in the estate, his master today, definitely cannot be considered to be in a good mood.

"Extremely important?" He softly sounds, accompanied by laughter, those who come here in request of an audience, which one of them dares say it isn't important, after a moment of consideration, his voice recovers its gentle warmth, "Allow him in."

The footsteps once again distances away, and a while later, they return with two sets of steady steps, an elderly voice sounds from outside: "This old minister Qin Xun greets Prime Minster."

The old housekeeper walks up, opening the room doors, Lou Che is still maintaining his leisurely seated position, his elegantly handsome face carrying a smile like that of the spring breeze, yet those eyes containing deeply imbedded chill, does not lighten in the slightest, "Lord Qin please."

Qin Xun nods his head, slowly stepping into the room, not daring to show any disrespect towards the well refined man in front, he sits a seat down from the first guest seat, only soiling half the chair, as he solemnly sits.

A maid serves up hot tea, the steam gently rising, and its tea fragrance instantly overflowing the room, a ghostly flavour diffusing into the air.

Lou Che takes a sip of the tea in a leisurely manner, under a glance of his eyes, Qin Xun grows restless with great unease, his behaviour so nervous, it gives rise to a trace of suspiciousness, slowly placing down the tea cup, a light sound of collision between cup and saucer lures in Qin Xun's attention, "With even such clear fragrant tea not suiting Lord Qin's appetite, could it be something is troubling you?"

Taking a look all around, finding that the housekeeper, the maid, have all withdrawn, only Lou Che and himself is in the room, he unconsciously gulps down a mouthful of saliva, speaking up with difficulty: "Prime Minister Lou, this matter, don't know whether it's proper or improper to speak of."

His smile lines unravelled, eyes appearing even darker, Lou Che slightly straightens his body, revealing an expression of interest, "Exactly what is the matter?"

Extending his hand to wipe away the sweat on his forehead with his sleeve, Qin Xun appears fearful, his heart met with slight struggles. Showing a recollecting expression, he slowly starts speaking: "Prime Minister Lou, two months ago, Lady Consort Ying had a miscarriage, at the time this subject I was the Imperial Physician Hall's attendant to this, responsible in taking care of Lady Consort's body. According to the rules, all prescriptions issued from the Imperial Physician Hall should all be disposed of afterwards, that day, I went to find Lady Consort Ying's miscarriage prevention prescription, only to find that the prescription had actually disappeared, I immediately grew anxious......if the prescription is not to be found, then I'm unable to complete my job, so I could only go to the place where we make prescriptions, hoping to be able to write out the prescription from looking at the situation of the medications, once this old minister I arrives at the place where medication is prescribed, I found that, the placement spot for eucommia bark, had actually been swapped with saffron......" His voice getting quieter and quieter, trembling as he rises to his feet at the end.

Hearing up to this point, Lou Che also couldn't hold back a change of expression, gloomy and unpredictable, with his brows knitting together, he asks in an icy cold tone: "Are you certain?"

Qin Xun's entire body violently shudders, hurrying to his own defence: "Of course, this matter, I have already kept everything in my heart for over a month......eucommia bark and saffron are originally two completely different things, I have been an imperial physician for many years, how could I possibly get

this wrong? After that happened, I was also very worried, but couldn't find anyone to speak of this matter to, after that, I went to find the eunuch in charge of assorting medications—Xiao Lin Zi, wanting to ask about this matter, only to find he has been transferred elsewhere, but just three days ago, he suddenly died, even the cause of death had yet to be made clear, and his corpse was towed away."

Towards this confidential inner court news, he is growing more afraid, the more he thinks about it, unable to swallow down his food, unable to sleep peacefully at night, for two whole months, he has been tortured by this matter, hearing the death news of the medicine assorting Xiao Lin Zi three days ago, he was almost scared to death, thinking it over for half a day, he had only just summoned up the courage today to report this matter to Prime Minister Lou. Regardless of anything else, someone who can take control over this matter, other than the Emperor, Prime Minister Lou is the second ideal option, not to mention, this matter cannot be recklessly reported to the Emperor, afraid that under the dragon's rage, he too will be dragged into this, in the end, he could only come find Lou Che.

Having thoroughly listened to this entire matter, Lou Che's face did not actually show any emotions, graceful to the point it seemed as though he didn't hear any of it. Yet Qin Xun senses great pressure ten times heavier than before, a feeling that makes him dare not to even make a sound of breathing, a cutting ice-like air overflowing from the wordless Lou Che's body.

Unable to withstand the immense pressure within the room, Qin Xun speaks up: "Prime Minister Lou....."

"Lord Qin," Deeply speaking up, Lou Che side glances Qin Xun, sharp eyes forcing him to lower his head, "This matter, how many people knows of it as of now?"

Sweat once again rolling down from his forehead, yet he can longer sense it, all of his attention gathered on the man in front, with the appearance of a noble gentleman, he dares not to show the slightest of negligence, hurriedly answering: "As of now, this matter is known only to you and I.....but, a few days ago when I went to find the prescribed medicine, the medicine delivering eunuch has inquired, and even tried finding the prescription, I'm only afraid those with

the intention.....is able to vaguely guess it."

A cold humph sounds, Lou Che lowly laughs, those with the intention? Those with the intention can be found all over that palace, to receive a request from Qin Xun like this, looks like there is already someone who guessed the hidden secret behind all this.

"Lord Qin, this matter, you are half in the correct, half wrong.....keep your own mouth sealed, do not allow for others to know."

Once Lou Che's words were spoken, Qin Xun immediately knew that his own life has been saved, and couldn't help but to rejoice, the huge boulder within his heart has been lifted, he can now return and finally get a good night's sleep, hurriedly bowing down to waist level, dropping a few words of flattery, he hurriedly leaves the Prime Minister Estate.

Waiting for his figure to disappear, Lou Che reveals a look of difficulty, letting out a deep sigh, he stands up, walking into the courtyard, calling out: "Housekeeper."

As soon as the words were said, in a hidden area of the courtyard, the housekeeper had already walked out, bowing as he says: "My lord."

"Have someone to send a letter to the ministry of punishments, tell the Minister of Punishments to immediately pay a visit, then send another letter into the palace, in the evening of today, I need to enter the palace, let the one in charge of the inner courtyard Li gong-gong to await for his assignment." Concise yet strongly given commands, Lou Che appears as though he is ready to face any problems.

After a word of acceptance, he was just about to turn around, when Lou Che suddenly calls him to a stop again, turning his head, he actually sees Lou Che's eyes set on the garden, after a while of gazing, he asks: "Where's Gui Wan?"

"Madam went out early this morning, said she will be back before dinner."

After hearing this answer, he reveals a puzzled expression, unable to see Gui Wan, he immediately feels uneasy, turning around, throwing aside his distracting thoughts, he says: "Go attend to your matters."

The problem between him and Gui Wan, shall have to wait till this matter is

over to solve it, after all, they still have an entire lifetime......

Madam of the Qu Zhou rest inn, Fiery Xi Shi, is sat in the horse carriage right now, her mind drifting far away, repeatedly thinking over everything that has happened over the past few months, ever since two months ago, having come across that peerlessly elegant "gentleman", her destiny seems to have also turned down a weird path.

Just who could that "gentleman" possibly be? Suddenly shows up, mysteriously goes missing. Because of her disappearance, the entire Qu Zhou suffered an official restriction ban, because of this matter, she herself has been speculating for a long time, but has still yet to guess the actual identity of that "gentleman". A few days ago, she actually received an invitation from the "gentleman", due to the questions and confusion held in her heart, impossible to solve, she decides to come to the Capital City to see this "gentleman" again.

Ears suddenly catching the noise of carriage wheels coming to a stop, Fiery Xi Shi's brows lightly jumps, before she even got to speak, a clear voice has already travelled into the carriage: "Is it San Niang of the Qu Zhou rest inn?"

Upon lifting the carriage curtains, Fiery Xi Shi looks outside the carriage, the horse carriage is parked in a secluded street corner, a house with east and west wings connected to it stands before her eyes, a peaceful environment, a faint fragrance of wisteria lingering in the air, it does not look like a luxury noble residence, but an ordinary businessman's house, at the red lacquer main doors, stands a maid in yellow, bright and delicate, with extraordinary charm and bearings, smiling over at her.

Jumping off the horse carriage, Fiery Xi Shi greets in her own uniquely frank way: "Young lady, this place is....."

Slowly taking a few steps forward, Ling Long performs a simple bow, "Are you San Niang? Please follow me inside first." Seeming to know that she will follow after her, with a nod of a head, she courteously leads the way forward.

Fiery Xi Shi quickly observes the surrounding environment, before hurriedly following after her. Upon entering the doors, the scent of wisteria rushes into her face, in between breathing, her inhaling and exhaling completely filled with

this fragrance, and before her, a scene of purple catches her eyes, circling around the east and west wings within this property, is actually wisteria planted all around. The current season is the perfect time to see the blooming of wisteria flowers, with a blow of the cooling summer breeze, they gently drift down, descending to the ground. Entering this property, is just like walking on purple clouds.

Inner praises arising from the very bottom of her heart, she follows Ling Long and passes by the side wings, arriving at the inner courtyard, where oriole-like singing flows into her ears, her eyes follows the sound, steps coming to a sudden stop, no longer able to move.



"Reluctant to part, reluctant to part, unlimited lingering love confessed through the zither strings, the zither strings sounding cóng cóng like flowing water, resenting my darling's leave this time, will have no return....." [1] The oriole-like singing graceful, resonantly smooth, the back of a woman's figure faces San Niang and Ling Long, that one person standing alone in the middle of the inner courtyard singing an opera play.

A cool breeze surrounds them, stirring up the wisteria petals, circling around in the air, before slowly falling, like a set of stained clothing descending upon the singing person's head, shoulders, and skirt. The petals scattered on the ground also appears to have come to life, following the singing person's movements, fluttering, bouncing, yet the one singing opera does not seem to realise this, dancing on her own, performing waves with her water sleeves, singing in

solitude. Although only the back view can be seen, that posture, that charm of graceful beauty like water, bit by bit ripples out from her figure, purity, agility, and elegance, all of which have been woven together into an invisible net, luring the unwitting audience into place.

One step, one sway, one swing of the sleeve, "The person leaves this house empty and lonely, leaving only the sweet memories of the past behind......" [2] With a turn of her head, Gui Wan sees the arrival of others, grinning gracefully, the water sleeves spins in circles, leisurely swaying it gently, shaking off the purple petals scattered all over her body, and heads towards the two people, "San Niang has come from afar, yet I have been inattentive."

Fiery Xi Shi who just had her soul captured by the beautiful scene before her, leisurely sighs, laughingly saying: "To this very day, I really have to give it to you.....no wonder you were able to gain control of the words of mouth in Qu Zhou so freely." She has thought hard for many days, and only then did she understand one of the mysteries, why "gentlemen" found students to discuss literary with, why after she disappeared, Qu Zhou was suddenly hit with a wave of students writing up a petition, thinking about it now, all of this is the masterpiece of the person in front right?

"San Niang is a clever person, as expected I could not hide from you." Walking to the side, taking off the outer performance gown, Gui Wan does not hold back her praises.

Hearing her admit to it so openly, Fiery Xi Shi was somewhat suspicious, "You.....exactly who are you?"

"Who does San Niang think I am?" A trace of teasing, Gui Wan turns her head displaying an expression of humbly asking for advice.

Fiery Xi Shi remains silent for a while, finally giving up, she sighs saying: "I don't know, could you be someone tied to the palace?" Thinking of her opposing inner palace matters, could she also be one tied to affairs of the palace?

Neither admitting nor denying, Gui Wan laughs it off, sitting down at the veranda, signalling for San Niang to sit with her, only after seeing her seated, did she speak up again: "San Niang, I have matter I would like to request for your help in, don't know if this is possible?"

"Gentleman, you have everything in your reach, if even you have something you cannot do, how could I possibly help you?" Although not knowing exactly who she is, but she is able to work out, the one before her, is no ordinary person.

"This matter, only San Niang is capable of," Gui Wan sighs and says, seeming to hold unlimited frustration, "San Niang has an extensive web of contacts, I'd like to invite San Niang to live in this house, recruit talents, gather intelligence, and become the eyes and ears within the Capital City."

Inviting San Niang here is also of last resort, the net of intelligence within the Prime Minister Estate can only carried out under the command of Lou Che, the things she has to do now, is running in opposition of Lou Che, the only way out, is to cultivate her own wings (assistants).

Seeing Fiery Xi Shi say nothing, Gui Wan indifferently smiles, "What is San Niang afraid of, are you afraid of the unforeseeable future?"

"I am not afraid of the future," Fiery Xi Shi slowly speaks, suddenly seeming to have thought of something, asking: "What opera play was gentleman singing just now, it was really nice, young masters also knows how to sing opera?"

Seeing her continue to address her as "gentleman", Gui Wan knows she is one who greatly values feelings and old friendships, not forcing her, Gui Wan smiles and replies: "I was singing {{Peacocks Flying Southeast}}. My mother has taught me to sing opera since young, saying, life is like an opera play, only when you can sing out the feelings within the play, can you face life with a smile, and also cultivate the beauty of actions."

An expression of sudden realisation is shown on Fiery Xi Shi's face, secretly speculating, no wonder why this "gentleman's" every move is able to carry a leisurely beauty, so this is how it was cultivated, she also inevitably grows curious towards her mother, what kind of a mother is able to raise such an extraordinary woman? At the same time, a surge of impulse rushes up her heart, wanting to stay here, is a decision of a lifetime, not to mention she cannot take back her words later.

Seeing her expression appear complex, Gui Wan was also able to vaguely guess her thoughts, continuing to say: "What I want San Niang to do, is only rounding up a web of contacts, it is not anything bad, San Niang has also gotten fed up of

being in Qu Zhou, why not try a change of environment?"

Almost completely persuaded by her, San Niang still has some final hesitations: "But my family....."

"Ling Long." Gui Wan understands what to do as soon as she hears this, softly calling out to the maid beside her. Ling Long walks up front, taking out a stack of banknotes from a box placed at the side, and places it before San Niang, gently saying: "San Niang's family has already been picked up in Qu Zhou, and shall be arriving in the Capital City in two days, here is thirty thousand liang funding for San Niang, for you to recruit talents and gather intelligence here."

Completely stunned, Fiery Xi Shi develops a sense of unpredictable feeling towards Gui Wan who is always holding a smile, everything appearing blank before her. With the hardening of her heart, she reaches out and accepts the banknotes, promising: "Rest assured, this matter I will do a good job with it."

Seeing her accept it, Gui Wan also sighs in relief. Looking at the box beside her, she feels her heart jump and turn, the asset her mother has left her, is beginning to come to use now, to be able to contribute in helping out the Empress in the palace, this should also be her mother's wish right?

This is also my bottom line, what I can help with, what I can do, this is the bottom line. Secretly sighing to herself, Gui Wan faintly smiles as she looks over the courtyard, yet her vision has lost its focus.

All of a sudden, someone runs up from the entrance, hastily charging in, whispering into Ling Long's ear, and stuffs a small note in her hand at the same time, Ling Long waves her hand, allowing him to withdraw, before slowly walking up to Gui Wan's side, passing her the note as she softly says: "De Yu gong-gong's urgent message."

Fine jade-like fingers opens up the note, after thinking for a moment, Gui Wan gathers together her smile, voicing out her shock: "Saffron....."

"Madam....." Seeing the arriving person, De Yu strokes at his waist belt, neatening out the wrinkles on his outfit caused by a long time of waiting, and then approaches her. Having just been promoted to the head of Zhang Ning Hall,

changing from purple robes to blue silk clothing, due to his naturally clear skin, as well as his courteous and refined bearings, his entire being beams with an air of youthfulness, blooming with radiance.

Gui Wan clear off rouge and powder, in a body of ordinary palace outfit, a simple glazed hairpin inserted into her done up hair, exhibits the elegance of washed away magnificence, seeming to be hiding her nervousness as she thinly smiles, stepping through the Xuan Yu Doors, having looked all around, with no sighting of other figures, she finally speaks up: "Gong-gong, your note was saying, Consort Ying's miscarriage had something to do with saffron?"

Lightly nodding his head, De Yu walks up to Gui Wan's side, standing shoulder to shoulder with her, looking at them from afar, they do not look out of ordinary, lowering his voice, he speaks next to Gui Wan's ear: "Madam, Prime Minister Lou has already entered the palace through the Xuan Ji Doors, currently investigating at the Imperial Physician Hall, your presence within the palace right now is of utmost inconveniences, do you want to change into a different outfit first?"

This De Yu's thinking is indeed very thorough, Gui Wan thinks to herself, secretly entering the palace this time, her objective is to investigate this case before Lou Che, of course she needs to avoid the eyes and ears of others, smiling, she turns her head to the side, a face of cunningness, wondering: "What will be good to change into?"

"Dress as a palace maid......" De Yu seems to carefully look over Gui Wan, shaking his head, "Not too suitable, better to just dress up as a gong-gong."

"Are there no other choices?" Acting as though it was unintentional, Gui Wan thinly smiles as she asks.

••••

After a while, stepping out from the side hall of Zhang Ning Hall, Gui Wan finds it difficult to adapt to her outfit as she pulls at the clothing, seeing De Yu's intently watching her, she cannot help but to laugh, asking: "Is it looking too strange?"

Awkwardly turning away, De Yu takes a step back, slightly lowering his head, humbly saying: "No, Madam."

Stepping down the stairs, looking left and right, Gui Wan asks the person beside her: "What people has Prime Minister Lou seen after entering the palace?"

"As soon as he entered the palace, he summoned Li gong-gong, then went to the Imperial Physician Hall, and then respectively entered the medicinal herbs room as well as the side hall used to decoct the herbal medicines, right now, they seem to have headed to the prohibited area of the palace." Faithfully reporting with concise details, not a single point missing.

Gui Wan lightly knits her brows, "Really is making sure not a single drop leaks out, this is bad....." Lou Che link after link, linking connections together as he investigates, how is there possibly any other places he can set his hands on?

"Madam," Noticing Gui Wan's look of difficulty, De Yu reminds, "If Prime Minister Lou has already found something right now, then he would not have to continue investigating further. Not to mention there is a lapse of two months between the happenings of this matter, some of the clues have been blurred, everything still requires planning in a long-term perspective."

Giving him a look full of praises, Gui Wan nods in agreement, remaining silent for a moment, before speaking yet again: "Consort Ying's miscarriage two months ago, other than Imperial Physician Qin, were there no other attending imperial physicians?"

"There was, there was also Imperial Physician Zhang, unfortunately a few days after the matter, he already retired and returned home."

Originally a problem with answers they are already unsure of, thus becomes even more complicated and confusing as of now, Gui Wan only feels as though a scene of boundlessly white fog lies before her eyes, carefully thinking it over, she lightly asks De Yu: "Regarding this matter, what do you think the chances are of it being the Empress' doing?"

De Yu sinks into deep silence, not daring to answer this question with casual ease, after careful consideration, he speaks up: "Little chance, the Empress at the time was already affected by the 'Hu Guo Temple' crisis, under semi-house arrest in the palace, there should be no energy spare to do this."

Although this was also the answer she held deep inside, to hear this from

someone else seems to add a cetain confirmation to it, thus feeling like hearing a different answer, her heart grows slightly put to ease, but cannot refrain from giving rise to doubts, exactly who could have possibly acted so recklessly in the back palace?

The two of them talk as they walk, although they came across a few eunuchs and palace maids along the way, there were actually no fright, no danger. Wandering into the back palace courtyard, a little eunuch runs up, whispering a few words into De Yu's ears, and quickly leaves. De Yu turns his head back, seeming to speak with concern: "Prime Minister Lou has now headed to Jing Yi Palace to see Lady Consort Ying."

Gui Wan indifferently smile as she listens to his report, secretly full of praises, she has indeed not found the wrong person, this person works very cautiously, and also understands how to accommodate to circumstances, give it a little more time, and he will definitely become the dark horse^[3] within the palace. Unfortunately the news that made its way into her ears, is not in fact anything pleasant, Gui Wan softly mutters: "Lost the opportune moment....."

"Madam, there's still one more place, we can go take a look." De Yu's refined face appears concerned, and thus advices.

"What place?"

"All medicine concocted for an imperial consort, will require having another to taste it first, thus an extra bowl would be prepared, only after the taste tester has consumed it without any problems, would the medicine be sent to the imperial consort." Someone who often taste medicine all year round, should already have become familiar with the medicinal properties, why is it that they didn't realise the medicine contained saffron?

"Your meaning is....."

"The one who taste tested Lady Consort Ying's medicine, should be at the side hall of Yu Gan Palace."

"Let us quickly go then." A beautiful smile blooming like a flower, Gui Wan's feelings of joy emerges, in that sweet moment, a bewitching charm is hidden within that extremely elegant beauty, making De Yu fall into a trance upon

seeing it, pulling himself together, Gui Wan had already walked a few steps ahead, he hurriedly follows after her.

They had only just arrived in front of the corridors of Yu Gan Palace, when De Yu suddenly jumps forward, desperately calling out in a low tone: "Madam, ahead."

Gui Wan instantly glances over, walking over from not too far away is actually Lou Che's party, with him were also the likes of a few officials and eunuchs following behind, a chill overcomes her heart, didn't think that even this place, did not escape him, simply not a single leakage. At the same time she was slightly panicking, the disguise she's in can get past others, but cannot possibly slip by Lou Che's eyes. Fortunately this spot is the corridors' turning corner, they don't seem to have looked over here.

"Madam," In a moment of haste, De Yu acts quickly within times of emergency, pulling Gui Wan's hand, gently saying, "Follow me to Yu Gan Palace for shelter." The two people follows the corridor, arriving at the main hall of the Yu Gan Palace, they did not think too much, and push opened the doors, stepping inside.

The Yu Gan Palace was built by the late emperor who was luxurious by nature, usually used by the Emperor to rest here and deal with certain matters, forbidding the ordinary people from disturbing, right now it is very quiet, not a single person is here, the interior of the hall adopts a design of natural lighting, sunrays beaming into the room, glass crystals, also used to attract the outside lighting inside. Gui Wan has seen countless treasures before, but upon entering this room, she still falls into a dazzling feeling, indeed exquisiteness that rivals nature, such design as resplendent as jade, as magnificent as gold.

Not allowing for her to fully appreciate her surroundings, a voice suddenly sounds from outside, seems like someone is entering the hall, Gui Wan was absolutely surprised. This place does not allow for casual intrusion, exactly who could be coming here right now? And how is she to explain her reason for being here? Turning her head back, she faces De Yu's deeply serious expression, the two of them exchange glances at loss, whilst the sound of footsteps and voices is already getting closer and closer.

The main doors of Yu Gan Hall opens with a "zhi—" sound.

Three palace maids files in, the first one seemingly shocked as she speaks up: "Why have the curtains not been drawn in the hall, how do you get the job done, could you have forgotten Nanny's scolding last time?" The two palace maids behind, dares not to answer, submissively responding to her, not long later, the glass crystals are covered by the curtains, the brightly lit hall just now suddenly turning absolutely dark.

Crouching between the wall and the dragon throne, Gui Wan carefully breathes, her eyes rolls to the side, seeing De Yu, he also holds a trace of nervousness, inevitably finding it laughable, she reveals a slight smile, secretly rejoicing, their luck really isn't bad, this is the renowned gorgeously magnificent palace, even the distance between the dragon throne and the wall holds an air of particular grandness, actually able to hide two people. If she is the emperor, she's afraid that the first thing to do every day, will be to check whether anyone is hiding behind this seat.

The inside of the hall suddenly becomes as dark as night, falling into dark hours, the sound of the palace maid's footsteps seems to be walking in circles in the palace hall, other than that palace maid with an especially fierce tone, the other two did not utter a single word, finally waiting till they stopped busying, the opening of the doors sounds again, and only then did Gui Wan sigh in relief, a supporting hand placed on the ground, she raises her knees, was just about to stand up, when the three palace maids suddenly halts in closing the doors, lowering their bodies as they kneel on the floor, speaking in unison: "Greetings Lady Consort Li."

Secretly lamenting, Gui Wan felt begrudged at heart, yet she could only lower her body once again, withdrawing into her original spot. Since Consort Li and others are stood in the hall, and Gui Wan could not possibly poke out her head to watch, only a few words vaguely drifts past her ears. After waiting for a while, the closing of doors, once again sounds, and peace is finally restored in the hall.

The silence continues for a long time, and they did not hear anymore sounds, De Yu has also just let out a sigh in comfort, recalling how they found this spot in a moment of panic just before, it can be considered a frightful situation but no danger, a smile slowly climbs his face, he gets up first, before extending his hand

to help Gui Wan up. The two of them meet eyes, in face of the current situation, they both find it rather funny, lightly laughing out loud.

Smiles running deep, Gui Wan glances from the corner of her eyes, finding De Yu seemingly looking at her in a daze, gathering her smile, she turns around saying: "Let us quickly leave whilst we can now."

With her light reminder, his heart receives a shock, nodding his head, he keeps his movement light, making his way to the doors, his hands has just caught the door handles, when sound of footsteps can once again be heard, retracting his hands, he looks back at Gui Wan, Gui Wan also appears grave, with unspoken understanding, the two of them can only choose to go back the usual place, hiding away.

Annoyance rising, Gui Wan laments, could it be that they have hide behind the dragon throne all day today? Matters of the back palace is rapidly changing, wasting half a day of time, don't even know what other tremendous changes could occur.....just when she was deeply thinking this, someone had already entered Yu Gan Hall, the sound of a gentle women's voice can be heard: "Did you get the job done?"

Gui Wan was suddenly shocked, this voice is clearly Consort Li's, why would she leave and come back?

"Lady Consort, this servant I have already sent the poisoned wine over. But, ran into Prime Minister Lou along the way, this servant was scared......so......Lady Consort please show some mercy ah....." The one answering seems to be a palace maid, her voice right now actually carrying a crying tone, sobbing for mercy.

Hearing up to here, she can vaguely guess what is going on, Gui Wan busily listens on attentively, but what followed was just silence, only the palace maid's weeping can be heard, still suppressed, seeming to not dare cry out openly, such sound overflowed the entire space. All of a sudden, the palace maid suppresses a quiet cry, this sound drills into the chest, overwhelmingly shrill, actually sounding even more shocking than that of crying out loud, hearing this also made Gui Wan's heart jump, not knowing what exactly happened inside the hall, yet the miserable cries of the palace maid, bitterly crying in pain, soundlessly,

continuously, tumbles past her ears.

"Cheap servant, can't even carry out such simple task, what's the point in keeping you?" Upon hearing Consort Li's voice right now, it sounds like her tone has turned twisted, the usually gentle voice has actually changed into a sharp tone.

The palace maid's voice gradually decreases, struggling movements has also decreased, as though all have returned to the usual calm, all of a sudden, an earpiercing sound can be heard, on contact of a surface, presumably the silent woman's nails vigorously scratching against the floor, followed by Consort Li's low cry like that of a being scratched by a cat, screaming out: "Cheap servant, how daring of you....." Carelessly kicking at the palace maid, only then did the large hall once again calm down.

Gui Wan's heart runs cold, although Gui Wan was able to see this Consort Li is far from gentle as she appears to be at first glance, but she definitely did not think she would be vicious to such extent. Gui Wan herself is not a kind-hearted person, she too also plays with political trickery, at times of need she will also treat human life like grass, but to be directly face this right now, her heart still leaps up in anger.

Consort Li ah Consort Li, wait till I leave this place, I'll make sure you will suffer this tenfold.

This open and empty grand hall does not restore its previous brightness and extravagant beauty, instead it carries a suppressive gloom, no sound can be heard any more, nor was there the sound of Consort Li leaving. Gui Wan turns to look at De Yu, he also appears doubtful and aghast, seeming to not dare believe the truth he has just heard.

Could it be she need to deal with a corpse? This thought had just leapt over Gui Wan's heart, when Consort Li's voice can be heard again, her voice this time, tones down a lot, seeming to lose her composure, her voice trembling, speech incoherent, muttering to herself: "What to do? What to do.....he would definitely want me dead......no, no......I don't want to die......" In the end, she too was actually carrying a weeping tone.

Her panic and helplessness disperses into the air, Gui Wan carefully listens to

her disorganised words, suddenly feeling suspicious, didn't think that behind Consort Li there's also an accomplice, that's not right, rather than saying accomplice, it is more like a mastermind. Carefully taking this into consideration, Consort Li may be jealous of Consort Ying, but it has not reached such extent to strike a murderous blow. Listening to Consort Li's tone, the one behind this may terribly be one who stands above Consort Li, her thoughts starts spinning, Gui Wan tries to think what person holds this condition.

To have both, power as great as the skies, and also able to easily access the back palace? Just exactly who.....

"So this is where you are....." All of a sudden, an additional voice sounds within the grand hall, the indescribable gentleness in this voice, contains a long drawn out tone of luxurious laziness, a playful tone like playing hide and seek with someone, within this idle tone, there actually harbours a devilish nature, seeming as though eerily distinctive coldness lies behind those words.

No noise.....still no noise, Gui Wan feels as though even her own heart had stopped beating, her breathing becoming a heavy burden, in a moment of panic, she looks at De Yu, but only sees a bean sized droplet of sweat slide down from his forehead, heart in fright, Gui Wan feels her spine run cold.

Just when exactly did the owner of this voice enter? Before Consort Li came in, only she and De Yu gong-gong were in this grand hall, and when Consort Li came in accompanied by her maids, this person clearly wasn't here, the hall's doors were already closed, before this voice sounded, there were no sound of the doors opening, how could someone have possibly shown up so suddenly within the grand hall?

Not to mention this voice is very familiar, exactly where did she hear it before? Gui Wan remembers from learning opera plays with her mother since young, people's behaviour and voice, can all form a visual memory, why does this voice actually feel so familiar yet unfamiliar at the same time? Such distinctive voice, anyone who hears it will not be able to forget, so why is it that she's finding it difficult to recall?



The floor sounds "putong", Consort Li seems to have already dropped to her knees, losing all her senses as she cries out: "I don't want to die......don't want to die......" The arrogance and tyrannical behaviour towards the maid just now has completely disappeared, right now appearing absolutely pitiful and tragic.

No longer caring for Consort Li, Gui Wan's heart constantly pounds, silently struggling, waiting for this person to speak again.

Time passes by bit by bit, the hall sinks into silence, Consort Li's one draw one twitch of uneven breathing and depressive weeping, setting off a strange atmosphere within the silence, her patience is gradually fading within this atmosphere infected with sorrow, yet that man no longer speaks again.

Gui Wan's tensed feelings did not calm down along with the silence in the hall, instead, her nerves tightens the more it is stretched, her rational chord is being highly raised, a feeling like that of the heart jumping up to the throat, her knees have long lost all it feelings, her arms have also turned numb, she subtly adjusts her breathing, allowing her crazily beating heart to calm down a little.

"Done crying?" A shallow laughter diffuses into the air, like a naughty child's mockery after he's seen enough drama.

Consort Li does not seem to dare say anything, only suppressing weep after weep, suppressing it into a barely audible sob, after while later, did she finally answer: "It is this cheap servant's incompetence......I already......tried my best......" Even her words of pleading sounds delicate, such lowly attitude, weak and wretched to the point it's able to evoke sympathy from anyone.

"Did your best?" A voice like that of a ghost sounds again, clear like a light breeze blowing over the lake's surface, "Since matters have already gotten to this point, you carry on trying your best in doing a final thing."

Such warm and gentle voice, entering the ears, instead makes Gui Wan feel her hair stand on end, a cold chill washing over her heart.

Consort Li seems to be stupefied, the sound of weeping suddenly stops, a little while later, a sweet and gentle laughter sounds, one word one cry, laced in unlimited desolation, "I just knew it......towards her, you still......you heartless person, you're a demon....."

The one who was called a demon did not get angry and instead laughs, gentle like the curve of a willow branch, filling the entire hall.

"Three years ago......that day three years ago, it was you who plucked a flower from the peach tree for me, saying face wins over the peach blossom, it was really beautiful at that time ah......that peach blossom.....why? It has once again reached the season of blooming peach blossoms, yet you feel no sentimental attachment, do you have no heart?" The words of complaints grows a little shrill, like the struggling before death.

"Three years ago, your face indeed won over peach blossoms, but now, do you need to take another look in the mirror?"

Consort Li once again sinks into silence, all of a sudden, another sound of clothes and something heavy plunging to the ground can be heard within the hall again, just when Gui Wan was absolutely startled, a round of clapping resounds throughout the hall.

"Without doting grace, could it be that even one's self-respect and body all have to be brought out in a show of humiliation?" Such scorning contains a frost cold tone, spitting out vicious words, yet her voice itself is infinitely gentle, like the whispering of sweet nothings between lovers.

Her sobbing sounds once again, the difference being, her crying contains laughter, crazily, insanely, murmuring: "That's right, you will never feel sentimentally attached, you are a heartless person......ha ha ha ha, you even murdered your own child, how could you possibly have a heart?" Bitter laughter continues to sounds from Consort Li's mouth.

"Oh? How are you so certain that is my child, and not Lou Che's vile spawn?"

A view of darkness before her eyes, such boundless absence, Gui Wan abruptly freezes, unconsciously lifting her numb hand, resting it on her chest, feeling the slight beating, and only then did she believe the entire truth she had just heard, the one speaking is actually the current emperor—Zheng Liu.

Gui Wan is singing songs from a Yue Opera called **Peacocks Flying Southeast** or **Kŏng Guè Dōng Nán Fēi /** 孔雀东南飞. Many are familiar with the story of the Butterfly Lovers, but this internationally lesser known story is yet another famous tragic love story, similar to that.

A Peacock Flying to the Southeast was a tragic love story of a young man named Jiao Zhongqing and his wife Liu Lanzhi. Although the newly weds loved each other very much, Zhongqing's widowed and perhaps morbid mother could not stand Lanzhi coming between her and her son. Eventually she broke up the marriage. The young couple's dream of coming together was shattered when Lanzhi's mother and brother forced her to marry someone else. As a protest, they took their own lives, fulfilling their vow of living together in the other world.

[Credits:

http://people.wku.edu/haiwang.yuan/China/tales/kongquedongnanfei.htm]

[Link to a translation of the complete narrative poem – Peacocks Flying Southeast]

Personally, I'm not exactly a fan of Chinese opera, or opera in general but I think the lyrics of the songs are worth reading into...it's pretty hard to imagine someone learn to sing songs of such emotional depth from a young age

- [1] The first song sang by Gui Wan here is called Reluctant To Part.
- [2] And the second song is called <u>The Person Leaves This House Empty And Lonely</u>.
- [3] The dark horse or the hidden talent, is called cáng long wò hǔ / 藏龙卧虎 in Chinese, literally translating to hidden dragons and crouching tigers, referring to talented people remaining in the shadows.

And finally he's here...with Zheng Liu the emperor, introduced in a different light to the impressions we initially got of him, it's needless to say he's not a very nice person, and definitely isn't as weak as he made himself out to be.

So much going on in this chapter, and more to come too, but for now, what do you guys think?

Part 2



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Storm In The Back Palace (Part Two)

Not even in her dreams, would she have even imagined, the one who secretly added saffron into Consort Ying's medicine would actually be the one who gave Consort Ying three thousand worth of doting love. Why did it have to be like this?

In her impression of him, the Emperor is a weak and cowardly person, with no air of courage and no dominance that a monarch should have. Yet it just happens, that listening to his voice alone right now, would make her sense a highly inscrutable overcast of oppressiveness. Two years ago, Zheng Liu was able to stand victorious over the other princes, relying on this one word of

"benevolence" [1], could it be that this is all but a fake image?

Thinking up to this point, no matter how strong Gui Wan's calm mind can be, she too cannot refrain from dripping in cold sweat, turning her head to look at De Yu, whose face is also pale white, lips as thin as paper.

Gui Wan bitterly laughs inside, suddenly recalling a word of warning her mother had told her since young: Beyond people there are more people, beyond the sky there are more skies^[2], the art of trickery is vast with boundless reaches. One who sits in a high position, must hold some tricks up his sleeves, and should never be overlooked.

Hand clenching into a fist, and only when her nails dug into her skin, inflicting pain, did Gui Wan gradually get rid of that feeling of fear and panic, calming herself down, she gently presses her lips together, whilst silently hiding within the darkness.

"Lou Che holds great power, Prince Duan is greatly domineering, I being able to forbear to this day, is already the absolute bottom line limit, how could I possibly further tolerate her giving birth to this vile spawn?" His responding question seems to be filled with a matter of fact tone.

"You have no heart......you are clearly uncertain whose child that actually is...... in fact, you are also very pitiful, in order to sit on the dragon throne, you are unable to live as yourself, even when facing one who shares the same pillow as you, you still need to put on an act......could it be that placing such pain and suffering onto others will make you happy?" Consort Li's laughter ripples, seeming to have restored her usual gentle grace, but all those within the hall understands, her spirit is already on the verge of collapsing.

"As someone who is already about to die, there is no need to overthink anything, just enjoy the rest of your time."

The hall once again sinks into silence, Gui Wan feels as though a stone is stuck in her chest, her body feeling suddenly cold suddenly hot, alternatingly striking her, and her thoughts are rather jumbled up, such gloomy mood like her body has sunken into the boundless darkness.

"Your majesty....." Consort Li's grieving voice once again sounds, softly yet

sorrowfully asking, "Have you ever loved me?"

A light sound of scoffing, as though what he heard was a joke, "If you still had little use, I believe I would still love you for some time."

"Then do you love Consort Ying?"

"Love, of course I love her, she is but a great chess piece that I can use to keep Lou Che in control, as of now, I do not have any thoughts of discarding her."

Consort Li laughs, laughing savagely and insolently, seeming as though something great just happened, not at all like one who is about to die.

The laughter is abruptly choked off, the voice of devilish charm asks with overflowing tenderness: "What you laughing at?"

Her breathing having been cut off, can only draw in little amounts of air with great difficulty, disjointedly breathing out the words: "Your majesty......you're so pitiful......you actually......don't understand......don't understand love." Finishing that one sentence, all breathing completely disappears, clothing comes in contact with the ground surface, the body slowly slides down, only the hate and resentment left behind before her dying breath, seems to have remained in the hall, feelings of mourning lingers, such that even the perpetrator seems to have frozen on the spot, not speaking a single word, not making a single move.

Didn't think Consort Li would end her life here just like that, towards her, Gui Wan feels disgust but at the same time, she also gave rise to feelings of compassion. Before she died, she had still revealed a slight show of goodwill, not to mention her own fate is this tragic......

"Eavesdropped enough?" Footsteps slowly paces near, gently asking.

Behind the dragon throne, her heart resists from beating, Gui Wan's entire body turns ice cold, like being thrown into an ice pit.

Within a moment, Gui Wan's mind produces an illusion, the one gradually approaching does not seem to be the current Son of Heaven, but a demon, that sort of abnormally demonic sense she gets just from hearing his voice, persistently lingers in her mind, indirectly affecting her judgement. If beside this dragon throne, both sides are open, she would definitely choose to sacrifice one amongst the two, pushing De Yu out without hesitation, but the dragon throne

in this Yu Gan Hall, one side is attached to the glass crystal pillar, only Gui Wan's side is open spaced.

Zheng Liu seems to be deliberately torturing them, his steps paced very slow, rhythmically closing in, very lightly, very lightly, like dust refusing to sticking to the surface. Gui Wan's heart pounds crazily fast, for the first time, she feels so close to death, even when her body along with the horse fell into the valley at Feng Qi Slope, when the Nu Tribe's long arrow skimmed past her sleeve, she has never felt as alarmed as this before, hundreds and thousands of fleeting thoughts flashes past her mind, yet not one is able help her escape this.

The footsteps suddenly stops, separating herself from the back of the seat, Gui Wan seems to hear his light chuckle at close proximity. Once her mind spaces out, a hand had already grabbed onto her shoulder, her body forcefully yanked out from the back of the seat, stumbling, all that could be heard was a "si" sound from her collar, and Gui Wan falls in front of the dragon throne.

When being pulled up, Gui Wan's eunuch hat had already fallen, a head of elegant silk hair falls loose from the binding of the glazed hairpin, spreading like the highest quality of black silk. The glazed hairpin hits the ground, creating an impact against the marble floor, clear sounding like the breaking of jade, shocked by this breaking sound, Gui Wan immediately pulls herself together, heart calm as a mirror, mind clear like water, raising her head, she looks at the Son of Heaven.

Hair held up in a golden coronet, inner clothing of white Confucian robe, with a yellow robe very casually layered on top, don't know whether he did not pay any attention, or whether he did not organise himself after the pestering of Consort Li just now, his skirt is slightly wrinkled, beside his forehead, there are a few loose strands of hair hanging, the usually well-refined emperor carrying three points of evilness right now, filled with an air of arrogance, the noble air of the imperial family strongly exhibited, his eyes carrying a look of slight surprise, carefully looking over Gui Wan.

Originally thinking it was a little eunuch who trespassed this Yu Gan Hall, after pulling the person out, it actually turned into a little fairy, elegant to the point of extremely graceful bearing, one glance and he was able to recognise the one in front as —— "Madam Lou?" His words contains a light chuckle, seeming as

though he found something interesting.

Casually throwing back her sleeves, not even taking notice of how at ease and elegant this one action was, Gui Wan's hand presses against the floor, was just about to get up, but only just realises her waist belt had been released, with that one strong pull from before, her clothing from the back collar to the left waist hooked onto the decoration of the dragon throne, tearing a huge hole, right now with her movements, the clothing opens up, revealing her jade back and fragrant shoulder. Merely making a light frown, she then smiles it off, Gui Wan stands up, not caring for the clothing that slipped off her shoulder, thinly smiling, she looks back at Zheng Liu, respectfully saying: "Greetings your majesty."

"Tranquil like water, black hair like silk, smile like light plum blossoms, moonlike white skin, truly a beauty hard to come by."

Thin lips singing praises, Zheng Liu's eyes circles around Gui Wan's body, the words he has yet to say being, Gui Wan's presence carries an indescribably unique charm and also such casual and carefree nature, such view makes his heart ripple in thrill.

"To receive such praises from your majesty, Gui Wan dares not be worthy of such." So calm as though the two just happened to run into each on the streets.

Brows raising, a sharp look flashes past his eyes, "What was Madam Lou doing behind the seat? Could it be that you also grew greatly interested in this land of dragon origin?" (Dragon origin – symbolises Han Chinese nation)

Today she just found out just how formidable this monarch is, a completely different man compared to the emperor who usually relies on Lou Che to make decisions, if not for this coincidental opportunity, seeing it with her own eyes, Gui Wan would really not dare believe it. Lips delicately parting, a resonant voice saying: "The imperial family's air of vastly grandness, Gui Wan greatly admires, taking advantage of no one being here, I came in to enjoy the sight, disrupting your majesty's aesthetic mood, is my sin."

Acting as though she is unintentionally looking all around, she sees a few beams of light penetrating the inside of the hall, looking further to glance at the dragon throne area, she was secretly shocked, so this is how it is.

She has been having her doubts, the emperor is also an ordinary person, how did he know someone was hiding behind the dragon throne, only now did she find out, there is a lot more to the lighting within the Yu Gan Hall, using the effect of the glass crystals as a mirror, right now, the light coming in from the outside, perfectly shines on the glass, reflecting the situation of half the space behind the dragon throne.

Secretly astonished by her own finds, she does not dare to look behind the dragon throne again, scared Zheng Liu will find out there is still another person there, Gui Wan once again returns her eyes to the Son of Heaven. Right now, as long as she is able to find a chance to let De Yu gong-gong leave the hall, then half her life will undoubtedly be saved.

"Madam's aesthetic mood is very great, don't know what you saw, what you heard?" Zheng Liu smiles sceptically as he lightly says this, tenderness as vigorous as ever, yet those clear cold eyes were deadly locked onto her, refusing to let her go.

This question is undoubtedly most difficult to answer, her heart stands firm, Gui Wan gradually reveals a smile, "Heard everything, saw absolutely nothing." Words sounding playful, yet all said were the most honest of answers.

"Madam's honesty truly is of most noble moral character, making things difficult for me also, such virtuous human nature, to actually disappear before my eyes." A smile like the spring breeze, but in it, there harbours killing intent.

Her heart really wants to back away, yet she can only force herself to grit her teeth, slightly taking half a step forward, Gui Wan tucks the strands of hair that had fallen to her cheek side behind her ear, "Your majesty, why should you panic, Gui Wan is not the person you must hurriedly eradicate, could it be, your majesty believes that all that has happened today were all wrongdoings?"

"How could I possibly be wrong?" Looking down on all the arrogance within the world.

"Only those who have done wrong, would need to cover up their wrongdoings, since you have done no wrong, then why must your majesty feel uneasy at heart?" Questioning him back, Gui Wan's eyes were leisurely light, no anger, no panic, looking just as though she is speaking facts.

"Madam's remarks has allowed me to see the light ah," Raising his hand, he pulls Gui Wan close up to his side, his face displaying an expression of half admiring, half complex emotions, "Making me almost cannot bear to see you dead."

Hand fiercely locking onto her neck, slightly exerting a bit of force, Gui Wan's neck tightens, immediately finding it difficult to breath, raising her eyes, she notices the faint look of vast haziness within Zheng Liu's eyes, although it disappears in a flash, it was indeed real, no matter what, this is a glimmer of hope. Gui Wan's hand grips onto Zheng Liu's, seeming to have seen something unexpected, a shrill voice saying: "Lady Consort Li——"

Neck suddenly loosens, Zheng Liu's face turns dark, although he does not look back, but in that very moment he heard the surprised cry, he loosened his strength, a cold face watching Gui Wan slowly adjust her breathing.

Lightly breathing in and out a few times, Gui Wan gradually catches her breath, although she is secretly resentful inside, the Zheng Liu she raises her head to see, still has a smile like that of orchids spread across his face, "Your majesty is not actually an emotionless person, Lady Consort Li did not die unjustly."

"You think that I didn't kill you because of her? Truly laughable, she didn't even have such skill when alive, so what is there to fear when she's dead?"

"Although there's nothing particularly taboo of a dead person, but words that have already been spoken, cannot actually be erased, even when sitting high up on the dragon throne, there are still some extent of helplessness right?" She melodically says with a cold gaze.

"As long as you're dead, everything that happened today, who else could possibly know?" Emitting a laughter, horrifying to the bones, Zheng Liu steps forward half a step, once again covering Gui Wan's figure.

Gui Wan stands on the spot unmoving, till the very moment Zheng Liu's breath came right before her face, she still makes not a single move, only he closes in, his hand once again placed on her neck, she looks into his cold eyes, whilst carefully looking at him, she speaks up doubtfully: "With me dead, could it be that your majesty is able to forget all those words just like that? I'm afraid not

right?" Voice so soft sounding, as though penetrating right through the heart.

Movement rigidly comes to a halt, Zheng Liu's action of clasping onto the neck remains unchanged, yet not a single bit of strength is used, pausing for a moment, his thin smile once again appears: "Interesting, interesting......" Acting as though it was unintentional, the moment his fingers parts from her neck, they glide across Gui Wan's exposed shoulder, causing the tattered robe to slip down to her waist, the waist belt has long been loosened, with Zheng Liu's very light action, it descends onto the floor, thus shedding off the outer robe, inside, she is only wearing a very thin undershirt, skin like that of snow, a delicately exquisite figure, and also that unchanging face of casual and carefree nature, attractive to the extreme, an extremely demoness-like charm.

Eyes slightly darkens, the Son of Heaven's eyes wanders around Gui Wan's body repeatedly, sighing: "Madam's calm makes me very envious."

Seeing the depths of his eyes clear and calm, she was secretly surprised by just how unpredictable this person is, knowing his killing intent has dropped right now, Gui Wan relaxes quite a bit, "Your majesty holds the entire world, what is there that's not yours, so how could you possibly be envious of others?"

The distance between the two people were already extremely close, Zheng Liu does not care for the words that passed by his ears, his finger wraps around Gui Wan's hair, spinning it round and round on his finger, as though this action seems like great fun, he doesn't get tired of it. Black hair winding, trapping his two fingers, he shallowly laughs out loud, with one pull of the hair, he pulls Gui Wan into his arms, one hand tightly locked on her waist, one hand wrapped in her hair, caressing her tender and delicate shoulder, he gently says: "You're so intelligent, take a guess, in the end will I kill you or not kill you?"

Right now, she has already come to understand this person's moral character a little, extreme brutality, malicious and insidious, what's more terrifying is, he has concealed all this under a well-refined outer appearance, causing people to be struck with chilling terror. Gui Wan's lips parts, lightly saying "Then why don't your majesty play a bet with me?"

"Do you think, you have a stake worthy enough to bet with me?" Zheng Liu lightly ridicules, hand actually loosening her confinement, wrapping around Gui

Wan's waist, allowing her to speak comfortably.

"The outcome is still uncertain, why fear whether there is a worthy stake or not?" A melodious voice graceful and sweet.

A burst of lightly wild laughter rings throughout the hall, a fire lights up deep in Zheng Liu's eyes, loftily yet sceptically, he softly whispers: "I also really want to know, what Madam and I will be betting on?"

Gui Wan's heart feels as though it slightly broadens, knowing he temporarily wouldn't lay down murderous intent, the corner of her lips hooks up, drawing a beautiful curve.....

"With a period of two years, to see whether your majesty will get what you want." Gambling on the entire country, casually coming out of her mouth.

Zheng Liu finely squints his sharp eyes, adding an additional three points of evil air to his character, a seeming yet un-seeming smile surfaces on his lips, the hair wrapped around his finger let loose, fingertip lightly touches Gui Wan's neck, her icy skin of sparkling pure white composes a scenic painting with his fine and slender finger, clearly a situation of wandering between life and death, yet because of her open and casual personality, pure leisurely nature like water, a trace of cunning brilliance emerges.

"Is Madam trying to use a stalling tactic?"

Gui Wan light laughter resonates, holding in her mouth, an implication of a funeral invitation, she shoots back sarcastically: "Since your majesty knows, why not kill me?"

With the Son of Heaven's pride, even if he knows this is a stalling tactic, he would definitely still accept it, besides, this is originally a battle of persistence within the war of wits. The Emperor's greatest menace, is the two greatest power holders within the imperial court, which is none other than Lou Che, Prince Duan. To centralise imperial power, number one, remove the two obstructions, or number two, utilise the two powerhouses, but with Zheng Liu's true character today, she is only afraid that it will most likely be the former option.

His gazing eyes furrowed, the frostiness under Zheng Liu's eyes gradually

melts, his hand leaves her fine neck, landing on her jade shoulder, he lightly lowers his head, the loose hair besides his cheek touches that bright and delicately elegant face, eyes meet eyes, nose to nose, only half an inch distance between the lips, even when inhaling and exhaling, they could feel one another's breath, a faint touch of entangled fragrance slightly deluding her willpower by a few points, then further leaning in a bit his lips grazes past her cheek, softly whispering next to Gui Wan's ears: "This game indeed has a quite a bit of meaning. Say, regarding today's matters, the thing that is deluding my mind, in the end is it this interesting bet or is it.....you?"

Hot breath coming in contact with her ear, Gui Wan knows that his killing intent had completely disappeared, softly sounding a little laugh, "Your majesty's deepest implication, how could the average person possibly measure up to it?"

As soon as those words were spoken, bright lighting suddenly penetrates the hall, with a light sound, an eunuch open the doors and walks in with light movements, kneeling on the ground, softly saying: "Your majesty—" Hearing no answer whatsoever, he raises his head to take a look, and is rendered speechless, Li gong-gong freezes.

Within the dimly lit hall, there are only a few beams of light, using the outside lighting shining in, right now the two people in front of the dragon throne can be seen before his eyes, Li gong-gong carefully identifies the two people, heart starting to chaotically pound, deep down he asks himself, whether he has found the wrong timing to enter. The Emperor in an extremely ambiguous manner, has his arm wrapped around a woman in dishevelled clothing, the woman's clothing is half ripped, exposing a huge area of a shoulder, ice clean with snowy white skin, across the grand hall, he can also recognise, that type of devilish beauty and unique charm, once seen difficult to forget, clearly the wife of Prime Minister Lou.

Hurriedly lowering his head, acting as though he saw nothing, Li gong-gong respectfully kneels at the entrance of the hall. Doors slowly closes, an additional presence resides within the hall, which once again returns to silence. Zheng Liu slightly loosens his strength, the hand wrapped around Gui Wan's waist wanders downwards, pulling up the tattered clothing, concealing Gui Wan's back,

covering her jade shoulder, then picks up the descended waist belt with embroidered patterns, gently lining it around her waist. His actions appear very orderly and methodical, filled with great patience.

Somewhat surprised as she watches his movements, Gui Wan soundlessly leaves him to it. Turning her head towards the still absolutely motionless Li gonggong she secretly laments, originally thought the main head eunuch within the palace, Li Yu is someone Lou Che had sent to monitor the Empress, looking at it now, he is also one of the observers planted by the Emperor. She inwardly cries out "so risky", this palace holds so many rights and wrongs, people's hearts sinister, truly is absolutely unpredictable.

Zheng Liu lets out a deep laugh, looking at Gui Wan, eyes sharp, yet his words holds unlimited warmth and gentleness: "What? Is it very surprising?"

Slightly gathering up her expression, so that when she turns her head, it loosens up a bit, Gui Wan seemingly smiles, "People's hearts are unfathomable, makes me deeply realise this......" A seeming lamentation, yet it is spoken in a playful way, causing Zheng Liu to give rise to a gentle sound of laughter.

At last, the waist belt is tied up, hands coming to a stop, Zheng Liu turns around and makes his way down the steps, slowly paced steps heading towards Li gong-gong, the head eunuch kneeling on the floor seems to be extremely fearful, shrinking back a little as Zheng Liu approaches. Up till the very moment Zheng Liu comes right before him, he can only stand up, as he quietly reports, Zheng Liu seems to be getting happier and happier, his smile thickening quite a bit.

"Madam, are you willing to make a small bet with me right now?" Containing a calculative chuckle, Zheng Liu's eyes were locked onto Gui Wan, carefully observing her behaviour.

Simply having no power to refuse, Gui Wan lets it go with a smile, a clear view like the moon, leisurely sighing, she slowly replies: "Your majesty's aesthetic mood, how could I dare disrupt it?"

Figured that Gui Wan will answer as such, a smile reaches the bottom of Zheng Liu's eyes, walking up to the right side of the huge hall, the most inconspicuous pillar inlaid with a square piece of glass, he reaches out and lightly presses the

glass, then turns it half a circle to the left, in the left side of the Yu Gan Hall, there is actually another door, Gui Wan silently watches, her state of mind slowly settles down, she thinks back to when she was hidden behind the dragon throne, that moment Zheng Liu's voice suddenly sounds, making her receive a fright, so it is by the means of sophisticated machinery, comforted by this revelation, she is now feeling much more at ease.

"Your majesty——" Desperately called for the Emperor, Li gong-gong lightly asks accordingly, "This Lady Consort Li and palace maid's corpses......" Not daring to arbitrarily make the decision himself, he sees that the Son of Heaven's mood today is not bad, and therefore boldly asks this.

Glancing at Li gong-gong with a frown, Zheng Liu appears impatient, he has yet to open his mouth, when a clear and leisurely voice had already snatched the opportunity, "Consort Li was jealous of Lady Consort Ying, and actually added saffron to the miscarriage prevention medicine, because this matter was about to be brought to light, she has no face to face his majesty, and thus hung herself in apology of such offense, the maid followed her master through her suffering, in remembrance of past graces, his majesty shall not delve into the matter, keeping both master and servant's bodies whole."

Gui Wan neither hurriedly nor slowly makes her way down the steps from the dragon throne, gentle voice, smiling eyes, like the elegance of the moon, the tattered clothing opens a little along with her movements, further adding a casual sway to the person, elegantly distinguishable and admirable, walking up to the grand hall, her tone makes a change, looking at Zheng Liu: "The current Son of Heaven rules the world with 'benevolence', such lenient demeanour further graces the four seas, widely distributing across the world, what does your majesty think of this?"

Zheng Liu's eyes darkens, appearing still and bottomless, his smile steadily blossoms, with one wave of a hand, Li gong-gong understands the meaning, quietly saying: "Yes, your majesty is benevolent." And then bows his body, withdrawing out of the hall.

Towards her abrupt decision making just now, he does not seem to be angered, Zheng Liu's lips curls into a smile, playfully saying: "Within this one day, just how many more surprises does Madam have to give me?" Leisurely letting

out a long sigh, he seems to feel regretful.

"The light of a firefly, how could it compare to that of the moon, the shock your majesty has given me, is truly something that Gui Wan cannot forget in this lifetime." Firing back a light ridicule, in the end she just couldn't hold back from soothing the stuffiness in her heart.

Leaning on the secret door, with the show of a Son of Heaven's luxuriously lazy attitude, listening to Gui Wan's words, Zheng Liu just laughs it off, smiling at Gui Wan, "If others said those words, I would definitely hold a grudge, today Madam sayys such words, yet I cannot bring myself to hate you ah."

"The 'broadness' of your majesty's heart and mind also puts Gui Wan to shame." Seemingly praising, seemingly degrading, she says this in between a playful laughter.

Once the last word was spoken, Gui Wan had already come up to the entrance of the secret door, her eyes exploring the secret passage, her original image of a heavily dark passage turns out to be tremendously bright, the glass neatly lined along the walls uses the principles of reflections, attracting the outside light into the secret passage. Whilst admiring this, she also could not help but to sigh, the secrets within this imperial palace, sure is greater than the average, especially one like today's, being the greatest of them all.

All of a sudden, an additional sparkling crystal piece appears before her eyes, Gui Wan frowns in puzzlement, a surprised expression looking at Zheng Liu.

"Did Madam forget about our little bet?" With the secret passage being so narrow, the two people are practically pressed against each other, as Zheng Liu meaningfully says this in a soft tone right beside Gui Wan's ears.

Not understanding his intent, she does not inquire, Gui Wan accepts the crystal piece, continuing to walk through the secret passage, she does not know how long she has been walking for, when she suddenly sees a black wall in front, presumably they have walked up to the end now, smiling, she was just about to turn back and softly call out to him, when Zheng Liu suddenly extends his hand, covering both of Gui Wan's eyes, turning her body into his arms, her entire body completely fitting in. Gui Wan was startled, originally wanted to push him away, but because she remembered his identity, she had to think twice about it, and

could only choose to silently stay unmoving.

Yet again, that clear fragrance sits in his nose, Zheng Liu suddenly smiles thinly, releasing his hands. Gui Wan opens her eyes and takes a glance, the black wall has already been opened, and yet another grand hall appears before her eyes, attentively looking at the four walls of the secret passage, not knowing how many finely divided glass pieces are inlaid there, not knowing which one is the secret button that opens the secret door, just now Zheng Liu covering both her eyes, is also because he's afraid of her being able to explore the mechanisms behind the secret passage right? This way, even if she knows of the entrance to the secret passage within the Yu Gan Hall, what point is there? Secretly lamenting inside, both scared and worried, this person does things with such meticulousness, keeping everything in the dark, away from all the officials, rain or shine indeed unpredictable, a bottomless pit. (Rain or shine meaning good or bad)

Within this imperial palace, everyone is truly of outstanding character, those who lives here are all extraordinary, this thought skims past her mind, Gui Wan sarcastically smiles, walking into the hall.

Completely different to Yu Gan Hall, this hall has not even the slightest touch of glamour, no golden brilliance, no glass adornments, the interior exudes an air of scholarliness, simple and elegant, spotlessly clean. The imperial palace is filled with surprises, to actually still have such a quiet place like this, Gui Wan turns her head and looks all around, observing with full concentration.

Zheng Liu wanders towards the desk within the hall, pushing open the windows, the light fragrance of green grass instantly flushes up the nose, a gentle breeze blows, caressing her face. Gui Wan follows after him, watching Zheng Liu's movement, until he turns around, leisurely saying: "What we'll be betting on is over there."

Her eyes follows the direction he points in, entering her vision is actually the Prime Minister Estate's garden, Gui Wan was secretly surprised, only after a short moment of deep thinking, did she recall that this is Consort Ying's Jing Ye back courtyard, exactly the same as the Prime Minister Estate's courtyard, turning her head, displaying a tender beauty of careful pondering, she contains a smile as she asks: "Betting on this courtyard?"

"Of course not," Zheng Liu raises the crystal piece within his hand, holding it in front of his eyes, he looks into the courtyard, lightly smiling as he says, "Betting on the one within the courtyard."

- [1] The word for **benevolence** here is a tricky one to translate **rén /** 仁 yes it can mean benevolence but it can also mean to be **humane**, the foundations of being human which goes on about having a good heart, a loving nature...basically Zheng Liu is regarded as a very down to earth royalty which earned the most sincere respects from the commoners
- [2] Beyond people there are more people, beyond the sky there are more skies or rén wài yǒu rén, tiān wài yǒu tiān /人外有人, 天外有天 people cannot outdo people, as there are no limits in this universe, in other words, no matter how strong or talented you are, there will always be another above you.

I sometimes feel so uncomfortable translating Emperor Zheng Liu's parts, he gets way too intimate with Gui Wan that I'm just screaming in my head for her to just run away from him already. Of course Gui Wan is more intelligent than I am, and knows this is the only way for her to get out alive. But still, how much I wish she could just swat his hand away from her. Ugh.

Anyhow~ hopefully your questions that had risen from the first half of the chapter has now been answered...although there's probably more questions to follow, regarding the relevation at the end of the chapter hahaha

Full

The male in the image isn't very befitting of Lou Che but you get the gist haha



CHAPTER TWENTY

Such Pity

So the crystal piece given by Zheng Liu in the secret passage has such use, Gui Wan holds up the crystal piece in front of her eyes, once again looking outside, the view of Jing Ye back courtyard actually becomes perfectly clear, as if it is right before her, secretly astounded by this, her eyes circles around the courtyard, suddenly stopping at a certain spot in it. Her calm and pleased smile somewhat fading, lowering the crystal piece, she turns her head and says: "Your majesty want to bet on this?"

"Could it be that this is insufficient for a bet?" Fine slender hands, maintained like that of a woman's, rests on the banister, Zheng Liu lifts the corners of his lips, revealing three points of playful pondering, "Or is Madam afraid?"

Gui Wan's carefree and easy-going bearing weakens, eyes gazing back to the courtyard, her heart is hesitant at this moment, clearly aware that Zheng Liu wants to strike her down from the inside (psychologically), she originally should be tackling this with a very indifferent, calm, cool and bright outlook, so why is it

that when she sees Lou Che with Consort Ying, she senses fearful heartbeats, finding it difficult to answer back.

Giving rise to an unconstrained smile, "So you really are afraid? Such clear luminosity like the moon, so it too have times of gloom that are difficult to avoid?"

Her eyes meets with his cold sharp ones, "Gui Wan is just a mere mortal being, how could I possibly compare to your majesty's ethereal bearings."

A laugh like the spring breeze, once again an appearance of overflowing gentle warmth, "Rest assured Madam, I am also one who is loving towards fragrant jade^[1].....should Madam not want to play this bet, I will definitely not force you."

"Your majesty's aesthetic mood today is at its fullest, Gui Wan would never dare to sweep away your majesty's high spirits, moreover this bet was suggested by your majesty, even if Gui Wan has courage as big as the skies, I would still not be able to oppose the prestige of heaven."

Even if she manages to avoid it at this moment, could she possibly avoid it her entire life? Not to mention, if this diabolical cunning Emperor is unable able to make this bet right now, he will definitely thinking of other insidious ways, rather than facing Zheng Liu's unpredictability, it is better to observe the definite happenings within this Jing Ye.

Under the watch of Zheng Liu's deeply inspecting eyes, Gui Wan once again raises the crystal piece, turning her head, she gathers the view of that courtyard, such that is as familiar to her as her own home, under the little piece of crystal.

.....

Magnificent light overflowing, pouring in beautiful colours, within this thin and clear crystal, it actually appears to reveal another world, long drawn out feelings mixed into the tranquillity, that ethereal elegance of tender beauty, that handsome refinement of warm radiance, there is also those ties that cannot be cut off, all that is being reflected within this crystal, and subsequently transferred into Gui Wan's gazing eyes like water.

Finger loosens, followed by the falling of that magnificent light, not even

raising half a noise of clear sound, and it has already shattered into little pieces, just like millions of stars spilling across the floor, the brilliance had not yet shown any progress, and has already faded to nothing.....

Zheng Liu harbours a smile as he watches this scene, sharp coldness condenses within his eyes, yet his voice sounds a lot gentler, deliberately ridiculing: "Looks like between my Consort Ying and Minister Lou, feelings are indeed difficult to control....."

After a long while, no reply could be heard, turning his head, more sinister statements wanting to escape from those thin lips, yet that very moment his eyes looks to the side, all further comments were choked back. That innocent expression, face still carrying a smile like that of light clouds, head slightly turned sideways, seeming to be thinking about something, with no sorrowful demeanour, yet such appearance makes him sense a great amount of sorrow flooding out from within her, utterly arousing people's pitying hearts.

Zheng Liu contains a playful laughter, raising a brutal yet absolutely joyful expression, "To this very moment, I have only just realised Madam truly is a heart moving beauty." His finger outrageously stroking the side of her fair face, quietly saying, "What I love most is broken beauty, only in the most extreme occasion of shattered despair, would people feel there is no way to look away."

Gently warding off his malicious tenderness, her eyes lightly closes, once again opening her eyes, with an outpour of loveliness, "Your majesty's deep love and concern, Gui Wan really dares not be worthy."

"Has Madam forgotten you lost the bet? To so boldly reject me, could it be you truly disregard your life as such?"

"How could Gui Wan possibly dare to disregard my own life like this," Facing this evilly tender and unpredictable demon, the slightest loss of sense of propriety will give him the chance to grasp onto your weakness, "The things your majesty disregards, other people could regard it as a treasure."

The one who truly disregards human life, is the one before her who sits high up on the throne right?

"Madam up to now, you are still so eloquent, looks like you have not yet sunk into despair." How is he to force her into despair? He suddenly has such impulse,

wanting to break her wings, wipe away that indifferent smile of hers, and thoroughly destroy that unexposed arrogance and self-confidence within her.

Unable to help himself, he quietly mumbles: "I am but very much looking forward, to see Madam sink into the struggles of despair....."

"Your majesty's interest truly makes Gui Wan lament, unfortunately I am just a mediocre person, and finds it difficult to share your majesty's happiness." That type of extremely cruel pleasure, hearing of it alone, would make one feel three points of chilling fear, that type of biting cold, leaping into one's heart, completely "freezing" the person.

"Then what Madam has lost in today, what are we to make of it?" A change of plans, once again putting her in a difficult position again, just wanting to once again admire that moment of hopelessness.

A single hand on her shoulder, she pulls up the collar of the tattered clothing, face unchanging, still leisurely calm, "Was it I who lost today?" Eyes making a light turn, locking onto him, "Today can only be considered no lose no win, your majesty, the woman in the courtyard is but your beloved consort, could it be that you have forgotten this?"

Zheng Liu lightly says "So what of it?" At most an important chess piece, how could it affect his feelings?

"The face of the imperial family, even if your majesty does not care, surely many people will about it, for example......Prince Duan." Having said that, Gui Wan faintly smiles as she watches his face suddenly turn a little gloomy, secretly laughing inside, she continues to speak, "Your majesty, if you wait until Prince Duan comes to care about this face of the imperial family, would that not be intolerable for your majesty then? After all, in the eyes of all in the world, that is but the woman your majesty has fallen head over heels in love with." (Gui Wan is referring to Consort Ying as an iconic figure in the imperial family)

With Zheng Liu's Son of Heaven pride, how could he possibly be reduced to the laughing stock of the world?

"Madam's full display of knowledge^[2] right now, looks like you have extremely great confidence in being able to safely leave this place." His sharp cold eyes

flashes, because of her refusal to surrender, his killing intent rises along with his displeasure.

"Your majesty, let me tell you a secret," A tone of naivety just like that of an innocent girl, whilst Zheng Liu was slightly stunned, Gui Wan leans in towards him, "Just now, there were two people behind the dragon throne, do you believe me?"

Expression turning tense, Zheng Liu seemingly shocked, seemingly angered, coldly saying: "You think such words can fool me?"

"Worldly matters are like a game of chess, your majesty, one wrong step, and all steps shall be wrong. Your majesty is so wise, you should know what is the right thing to do." Today's battle has used up her entire body of solutions, just to be able to safely walk out of this palace, it has come down to this, her heart inevitably feels somewhat bleak.

Zheng Liu ponders in silence, staring at Gui Wan's face, wanting to see whether her words were true or false, remaining in deadlock for a while, he regains his smile, "Interesting, Madam, meeting you in Yu Gan Hall today, I really have benefitted a lot."

"May Madam remember, we still have a betting deal between us, as for the final price that Madam will have to pay, I can tell you today, it will definitely be your lifelong regret......regretting that you had ever set foot in Yu Gan Hall, because from that very moment, your hands has been tied."

"Today's matter, if I hear half a sentence of any circulating rumours, then the consequences will be of heavy losses, it is but not something Madam will be able to afford. You can never ever forget this, be careful of your words."

Having walked out of the palace hall, that chilly voice seems to still be echoing in her ears, Gui Wan unconsciously wraps her arms around her own body, right when she steps out of that cold and quiet palace hall, with not one person around, a smile like that of light clouds is still hanging on her face, yet from the corner of her eyes, tears are already sliding down.

Mother, you often said, actors wearing masks within the opera play, singing their sorrows, joy, anger, grief, that is all just an opera play, but why is it that, the scene I saw within Jing Ye just now, the two people were embracing, yet the

sour feeling within me was difficult to restrain.

Who is to tell me, tears in the play is acting, then what about the tears under the actors' mask, who is able to look at that? How are feelings to be endured?

Waves of cool breeze tucks in the sweet fragrance of green grass and leaves, brushing over the lake, blowing waves after waves of light ripples. Yao Ying stands within the courtyard, such infinitely frail posture, facing the tireless narrative of the person in front.

The curve of those brows like that of a new moon, those lips more delicate than that of flowers opening and closing, from time to time, issuing laughter like songs of the birds, such stunning beauty sufficiently softening the hearts of anyone.

Yet why is his heart not affected by this? Lou Che smiles, a little surprised by his own feelings, this woman who has once greatly affected his heart, is clearly exceedingly close to him, yet it feels as though they are as far apart as the ends of the world. Smiling, they have already changed.^[3]

In a sudden burst of heartbeats, a beautiful figure charges into his arms, Lou Che lowers his head and looks at that peerlessly beautiful face, knitting his brows, he coldly says: "Lady Consort, what are you doing? Let go." Wanting reach up to push her away, he finds that she has wrapped her arms around him tighter, for the time being, he actually could not break free.

"Lou Che.....how could you be so cruel? Throwing me into this nest of jackals and wolves all alone, not even caring for my life and death, clearly knowing that someone has placed saffron in my medicine, can I not even lean on you now for a bit?"

Such demeanour that makes anyone feel tender hearted, such feelings that are delicate and moving.

Hand increasing in strength, Lou Che seizes her arms, pushing her away with a foot distance between them, sharpness sweeping past those clear warm eyes, "Lady Consort, since you already know this is a world of deceit and dishonesty, then you should know where to draw the line."

Yao Ying's eyes of autumn water, is sparkling with tears right now, seemingly resentful, seemingly melancholic, as she looks at Lou Che, "What is the meaning of saying such?" The tenderness within her voice is actually somewhat shaky.

The handsome young man stands within the courtyard, calmly running his hand across his sleeve, wiping away the creases from just now, exhibiting graceful movements of elegant nobility, carefully eyeing Yao Ying, seeming to be heave a sigh.

"Lady Consort Ying, at the medicine taster court lady just now, I have already found out the one who placed saffron in your medicine is Consort Li," Blocking Yao Ying's move to intercept his speech, Lou Che's voice turns somewhat cold, "At the same time, I've found a very interesting matter."

"What matter?" Her soft and gentle voice also restores its calm as she gracefully asks.

"Do you not know? That's strange." Lou Che lowly laughs, "She said, she had once approached you Lady Consort Ying, reporting the matter of the medicine containing saffron, yet you gave her money, wanting her to keep this secret, this medicine, was voluntarily consumed by you."

The wind suddenly stills, Consort Ying's ethereally beautiful face still carries unchanging tenderness, but has gained an addition of dull pain, smile spreading, her lips forms a beautiful curve, "It is I who doesn't want her own child, killing the dragon child, so right now, have you come to condemn me?"

Lightly sounding a sigh, he glances over the scenery of the entire courtyard, the last traces of affections seems to have also melted away throughout these formless years, eyes looking down, he speaks coldly: "Rest assured, that medicine taster court lady will never speak again. You are perfectly safe, I am warning Lady Consort for the very last time, within the back palace, changes are constant, even if you need to take things into your own hands, you must erase all traces, and save yourself from falling into the subject of ridicule."

His words seeming to be full of utmost earnestness, teaching the arts of conflicts, yet Consort Ying feels more scared the more she listens, eyes widening, she looks at him thunderstruck, the meaning behind such words, the meaning is clearly......

"From henceforth, I will no longer be able to help you with anything, may Lady Consort take care of yourself."

No, the only light within her world appears to be diminishing into nothing, heart hit with a wave panic, she abruptly steps forward, pulling Lou Che around by the sleeves, "Could it be that you have forgotten your past commitment, to look after me all my life......"

"Do you still need me looking after you? Every time I come to this back courtyard, all the palace maids and chamberlain eunuchs are nowhere in sight, nor do I see anyone coming in, Lady Consort," Grabbing her hands and slowly throwing them off his sleeves, "Your power within the palace, has already reached such unbreakable point, where else would you still require external help?"

The final entanglement has already been cut off, deeply gazing over the woman before him, Lou Che frowns, a shallow smile on his face, the cold air under his eyes preventing Consort Ying from once again coming forward to stop him, in the end, he still turns around and leaves.

Lou Che speeds up his pace quite a bit, eager to leave Jing Ye, only when he sees a palace maid come forth to hold up a palace lantern for him, did he realise the skies were already dark, lamenting his lengthy stay, he turns his head, and looks towards the right in slight surprise, his eyes turns cold, lightly asking the palace maid next to him: "What kind of place is that palace hall?" In the past, he has never noticed it before, directly across this courtyard, there is actually such an inconspicuous palace hall.

The palace maid looks to the right in surprise, under one glance, she replies with a smile: "Prime Minister Lou, that is Chong Hua Hall, previously used as the Empress Dowager's place of paying respect to the Buddha."

"From within that palace hall, can the scenery of this courtyard be seen?"

"Prime Minister Lou must be joking," The palace maid naively laughs, "Separated so far apart, how could the scenery of this courtyard possibly be in view? Prime Minister Lou is overly concerned."

A cool breeze raises all around the front steps of Jing Ye Hall, Lou Che's sharp eyes are masked within his warming smile, empty and unreal, throwing back his

The shadow of the moon sparse and shallow, faintly lit with cold magnificence, the dense air by the pond, like fog like smoke, gathering the pond's clear waves, half dreamlike half magical. The weeping willow hovers over the pond, a hint of a beautiful purple figure remains standing by the pond side, one hand resting on the branch of the tree, long locks of black hair let loose, indifferent eyes gazing out, sunken into long and deep thinking......

Quiet breathing closes in, but dares not to disturb the fleeting thoughts of the one by the pond, De Yu gong-gong holds a set of a woman's simple and elegant palace gown, standing at an outer area of the pond.

Taking advantage of the timing to escape Yu Gan Hall, he had practically ran around the entire imperial palace, not knowing whether she managed to get away, even if she escaped, what about her tattered clothing? Rushing around for almost half a day, he had finally found her by the pond side of this remote Chong Hua Hall, and so his heart slowly settles down. Watching the person by the pond who seems to be immersed within her own world, that faintly happy figure appears to have blended in with the surroundings, sinking into the moonlight. De Yu opens his mouth, wanting to speak up and call out, when the person by the pond had already slowly turned her head, naturally smiling: "Have you come? You came at a perfect time, I was just worrying, how am I to leave the palace looking like this?"

"Madam," Slightly lowering his head, De Yu neither hurriedly nor slowly approaches her, stopping with five step distance away, seeing Gui Wan's calm state, he could not refrain from asking, "His majesty....."

"His majesty?" The originally thinly smiling Gui Wan sounds a light sigh, lamenting, "The Son of Heaven's honour truly is far from the ordinary ah, like the snorting of dragons, the roaring of tigers, not one to make an enemy of."

Originally wanting to ask what exactly happened in the end, but right now, he cannot bring himself to ask this, De Yu frowns, seemingly worried as he looks at Gui Wan.

"Are you concerned for me?" Gui Wan's eyes sweeps across De Yu, capturing

the concern revealed within his behaviour, she quips, "Rest assured, for now, I will not need to fear for my life."

Such calm and carefree tone, yet it still could not conceal the subsequent worries, like that of a million weights. De Yu was not only unhappy upon hearing this, but instead feels even more worried. Gui Wan sees this, her smile slightly gathering up, her drawn brows already knitting together slightly, revealing an pensive look.

The happenings of today, planted seeds of misfortune within the imperial palace, how can a few words have possibly misled him? Gui Wan bitterly smiles, within this hall, due to seeing the scene within Jing Ye Hall, her mind was put into chaos, when confronting Zheng Liu, she had actually uttered words of threats, although she is temporarily safe now, but to plant these seeds of misfortune for the future, errors have appeared within her strategy, right now, even if she wants to set it right, it is already too late.

Calmly thinking about it, when they were newlyweds, she already knew of the matter between Lou Che and Consort Ying, why did she struggle to retain her composure like that just now? The Emperor is so deeply unpredictable, that one meeting with him inside Yu Gan Hall, had already attracted his killing intent, further adding endless troubles and disaster for Lou Che. Originally, Zheng Liu was opposing both Lou Che and Prince Duan at the same time, even if he wanted to get rid of them, that will also require the division of who comes first and last, now that she had already seen through his true temperament, she is only afraid that the Emperor will be targeting Lou Che first.

After all, Lou Che protected her, doted on her, cared for her, what he has given her are the best things in the world. Yet what she brings to him, is endless troubles, she is only afraid that, the one who truly owes the other, is probably her more than him.

Gui Wan thinking up to here, her heart feels somewhat sour, as though her heart is filled with stuffiness, she could not help but to quietly say: "Could it be that I should really leave the Prime Minister Estate? Stay far away from disputes?" Leaving, will remove the thorn in the Emperor's heart, and will also not bring any disaster to the Prime Minister Estate.

De Yu listens to Gui Wan speak to herself, suddenly receiving a shock, he raises his head, facing Gui Wan lost expression, his heart could not bear it, gently advising: "Madam, the world is so big, the entire territory belongs to his majesty, to stay far away from disputes, it is easier said than done."

Hearing this, her heart receives a shock, Gui Wan's eyes looks towards him, studying De Yu. De Yu takes a step back, suddenly dropping to his knees, as moonlight paves a colour of jade green across the pond and onto the land, he makes a statement saying: "Madam, the scene in Yu Gan Hall before, is of worries but also of joy ah, his majesty wanting to oppose Prime Minister Lou and Prince Duan, was coincidentally overheard by Madam, but if Madam leaves, does that mean his majesty will no longer target the Prime Minister Estate? This is all a problem that will happen sooner or later ah."

Hearing this gets her thinking, Gui Wan's knitted brows relaxes, a thin smile faintly spreading, "If not one to make an enemy of, then it is better to avoid, could it be that gong-gong doesn't understand this principle?" To make an enemy of the Emperor, what are the odds of winning?

"Madam, did you not already make a two year deal with his majesty, moreover, what can be avoided shall be avoided, rather than avoiding like a plague, better to face the enemy head on ah." Such great words of earnestness, coming from the mouth of De Yu. He is originally a little chamberlain eunuch, kept far from the inner palace conflicts, his daily life spent like a walking corpse, to be dragged into this circle of disputes by Gui Wan that one night, originally a body of clean innocence, soiled by the mess of half a world of dust. Right now he actually has the thought of wanting to live on, living on more excitingly, even if it is only of little use, he still wants to become an umbrella within the palace, to help cover the person before him from the wind and rain. [4] Rather than living his life silently, it is better to have his moments of brilliance, De Yu resolutely marks this determination deep in his heart.

"Rather than avoiding like a plague, better to face the enemy head on?" Chuckling as she repeats these words herself, Gui Wan quietly murmurs, once again recovering that easy going and carefree attitude, looking at De Yu kneeling before her, she laughingly replies, "Gong-gong's reminder is right, it is I who was thinking too naively, with a period of two years, this battle of intrigues, who is

able to stand victorious in the end, is still uncertain....."

Her tone carrying a few points of light-mindedness, the haziness completely disappeared, De Yu could not refrain from raising his head to take a look, only seeing Gui Wan containing a smile as she stands in front of the willow tree, her brows raised, appearing wilful and haughty, such casual ease as though she is not affected by worldly matters, there is also a slight touch of passiveness towards life^[5], such charming appearance and elegant behaviour.

A light breeze raises all around, sweeping up the willow branches, sending the disbranched willow catkins fluttering, Gui Wan thinly smiles as she extends her hand, her fine fingers like orchids, with a light turn of her wrist, the willow catkin appears as though it has been brought to life in her hand, a gentle clench of the hand, an overturning of the palm, and the willow leaf seems to have disappeared from within her hand. De Yu was stunned upon seeing this, unable to tell whether it is her palm or a leaf at the time. Gui Wan spreads out her palm, a piece of willow leaf stilly lying on it, softly saying: "In order to exercise their wrist flexibility, a game player will often perform this exercise, and I have actually learnt a principle from doing this, sometimes, what you see, is not necessarily the truth, do you think that's right? De Yu gong-gong."

De Yu kneels there wordlessly, lightly nodding his head. Gui Wan presses her lips into a smile, throwing up her fingers, the willow leaf is removed from her palm, descending towards the ground, "Gong-gong, if I am to face the enemy head on, I will still require gong-gong's help, gong-gong, will you still be willing?" After all, it is the Emperor she is dealing with, just how many people will be willing to take on this risk?

The willow leave spins as it descends, rotating before his eyes, unable to bear seeing it get soiled in the dirt, De Yu holds the palace gown in one hand, his free hand catching the willow leaf, his head bowing even lower, respectfully saying: "Madam, I am willing to serve you faithfully." [6]

Quietly releasing a sigh as she accepts his loyalty, Gui Wan raises her brows, laughingly saying: "In gong-gong's hand, is that clothing for me?"

De Yu was stunned, and only just remembered, Gui Wan is still wearing a body of tattered eunuch clothing, hurriedly getting up, he takes a closer look, Gui

Wan's body of clothing has been teared from the back of her neck to her back, a glimpse of her skin faintly visible, heart instantly feeling apologetic, he hurriedly holds up the outer robe of the palace gown in hand, carefully draping it over Gui Wan's body.

Gui Wan responds with a faint smile, has yet to thank him, when a severe shout suddenly sounds from behind: "What are you two doing?"

Stunned upon hearing this, Gui Wan's eyes looks over, Lou Che was standing ten meters away, his entire face basked with a smile, yet appearing severely dark right now, his eyes like that of the night skies containing an unknown rage.

Lou Che walks up front, as his sharp eyes were sweeping past De Yu, his steps slows down a beat, expression slightly easing up, his eyes slightly brightens as they turn to Gui Wan, gently asking: "Why did you enter the palace today?" Glancing down at the body of clothing Gui Wan is wearing, to see that it is actually a purple eunuch outfit, slightly knitting his brows, giving rise to feelings of doubts.

Of course she cannot speak of the truth, Gui Wan slightly hooks up the corner of her lips, smiling as she says: "Only officials are allowed to set fire, but the common people are not allowed to light candles?^[7] I was suddenly in high spirits, and only wanted to take a stroll around the palace."

Although he can sense Gui Wan is beating around the bush and avoided the actual question, Lou Che just smiles, and did not get to the bottom of it. He has always coddled her, loved her, as long as she is in high spirits, he will let anything go her way. Pressing his lips into a smile, he sees her stood leaning against the willow tree under the night sky, with a strike of his heartstrings, he reaches out, wanting to pull Gui Wan into his arms, his fingers had yet to touch her clothing, when Gui Wan quietly backs away. Lou Che was slightly stunned, staring at Gui Wan's face, wanting to see though something, but when his peripheral vision sweeps past her neck area, he abruptly locks his gaze, with one stride, he narrows the distance between them, and with lightning fast speed, he seizes Gui Wan's arm, not giving her the slightest chance to escape, his other hand lifting open the outer robe draped over her body, under one glance, his face instantly darkens, thin lips tightly pressed together.

De Yu overwhelmed by the sudden fall of still silence filling the air, could sense the angry aura exuding from the body of this powerful prime minister within the current imperial court, seeming as though it has divided this place into a different dimension.

"Exactly what happened?" Such sentence escaping between his gritted teeth, Lou Che's eyes remains intently locked onto Gui Wan, didn't think the eunuch outfit under her outer robe actually has a teared opening from the back of her neck to her back, on her fair slender neck, there is also a very suspicious red mark, uncontrollably, his heart once again gives rise to a monstrous rage.

In direct confrontation with his forceful imposing manner, Gui Wan's heart is hit with a disaster, the bizarre happenings of today, the threat received by Zheng Liu, definitely cannot tell Lou Che of this, but how is she to explain all this then? Unable to bring herself to say anything, she leans her upper body, nestling against Lou Che, both arms wrapping around Lou Che's neck, with a sorrowful and disheartened tone: "So fierce ah, I'm very tired, can you not force me?"

Lou Che's heart throbs, wrapping his arms around her, fighting back the urge to interrogate her, his pitch black eyes showing a look of difficulty right now, in the end, he could only lightly sound a sigh, tightly hugging the person in his arms, the overflowing anger from before has also turned into a waves after waves of tenderness, deep down he still does not feel resigned, hatefully speaking in a low tone: "I will temporarily let it go today, but this matter, I must know." Exactly who, dared to touch his, Lou Che's wife, a sharp look flashes past his eyes, killing intent sweeping past.

Right within his arms, she could still feel the chill hit her body, Gui Wan shrinks back a little, softly answering: "Once it is time, I will definitely tell you."

Towards this answer, Lou Che was not satisfied, still wanting to ask again, but sees Gui Wan's tired face filled with hesitation. He picks up the outer robe and covers her body with it, covering that partly hidden, partly visible icy jade-like skin, lifting her body up, he coldly orders De Yu who was stood aside with his head bowed the entire time: "Go prepare the carriage."

De Yu raises his eyes, clearly sensing Lou Che's disgruntled mood, he wanted to take a look at Gui Wan, but was forced to retreat by the sharp and cold air

surrounding Lou Che, not daring to say anything, he quickly accepts his orders and hurriedly leaves.

"Husband, many thanks for tolerating my wilfulness." Chuckling as she quips, Gui Wan's eyelids drops, serenely hiding within his warmth.

Only after hearing those words, did Lou Che's expression calm down, revealing a warm smile, remaining silent, reluctant to leave this moment of tranquillity and warmth, slowly walking towards the less used palace path.

"Husband, do you know how the current Emperor managed to obtain the throne back then?" Gui Wan asks, seeming to have suddenly thought of this.

"It was because the Crown Prince passed away that year, and amongst the princes, the sixth prince was most benevolent, modest and courteous, extremely popular amongst the common people, that is why he was chosen out of all the princes, taking over the dragon throne." Leisurely speaking of the contention for the throne back then, a calm tone just like he is having a casual family conversation.

Benevolent, modest and courteous? Hearing such terms sure feels slightly beyond logic and above reasoning, Gui Wan secretly laments, continuing to ask: "In Husband's eyes, what kind of a person is the current Son of Heaven?"

Lou Che's steps comes to a sudden halt, standing amongst the palace path in surprise, his expression turning into a slight frown, "Why is your every sentence today asking about him?" Thinking of her only asking and mentioning another person today, his heart once again gives rise to displeasure.

"I am only curious." Resting her head against Lou Che's chest, Gui Wan slowly opens her star-like eyes, and sees the curled up moon, her mind deluded by the sight, softly asking, "Husband, if one day, I bring to you endless disasters, will you or will you not get mad?"

The entire earth suddenly goes quiet, the palace maids and eunuchs on the palace path dared not to come close, only one slender figure holding someone walks under the moonlight, the quiet and solemn face carries a trace of faint smile like that of the spring breeze brushing against a willow tree, gently pressing together those thin lips, not saying anything.

Just when Gui Wan thought he would not answer, and had just closed her eyes again, Lou Che's deep and pleasant voice sounds through the night sky: "Bring me disaster? I have yet to come across an unsolvable disaster in this lifetime, not to mention....." Lowering his voice, he holds Gui Wan close, leaning in towards her ear, his cheek plastered to her cheek, containing his laughter as he says, "For you, I will gladly endure all hardships."

- [1] Loving towards fragrant jade or lián xiāng xī yù / 怜香惜玉 literally translates to feel tender towards fragrance and cherish jade, the words tender and cherish here refers to loving heart, whilst the words fragrance and jade refers to a beautiful woman, all in all, the phrase refers to a man's tender heart or love and affection towards women.
- [2] Full display of knowledge or talent or fēng máng bì lù / 锋芒毕露 literally translates to blade and spear all exposed, referring to the threatening show of arrogance and pride, boasting strong victory, or it could refer to people who completely reveals their competence.
- [3] They have already changed or wù shì rén fēi / 物是人非 the things remain the same, but the people have already changed.
 - [4] Wind and rain or feng yǔ / 风雨 is a metaphor for trials and hardships.
- [5] The original phrase for **passiveness towards life** is **juàn liàn hóng chén** / 眷恋红尘一juàn liàn / 眷恋 means sentimentally attached whilst hóng chén / 红尘 (literally translated as red dust) can be used to refer to the mortal world or mortal affairs. The phrase is an old saying referring to the passive attitude towards life where **one does not keep grieves, joy, life and death in their mind**. Another way, probably a nicer way to explain it will be, one who does not allow for negative setbacks in their life.
- [6] **To serve someone faithfully** is the nicer way of translating the original phrase **quǎn mǎ zhī láo /** 大马之劳 which literally means **to serve someone like a dog and/or horse**.
- [7] Only officials are allowed to set fire, but the common people are not allowed to light candles? Zhǐ xǔ zhōu guān fang huǒ, bù xǔ bǎi xìng diǎn dēng ma? / 只许周官放火, 不许百姓点灯吗?:

In the Song Dynasty a new magistrate called Tian Deng forbade the local people to say "light the lamp ",because "lamp" (dēng) sounded like his name. When the Lantern Festival came around, a notice was posted: "With the permission of our magistrate, the people may set fires for three days." By "set fires" was meant "display lanterns". This proverb, derived from the above story, satirizes rulers who indulged in doing all kinds of evil things, but deprived the common people of their basic rights.

[Credits:]

Lou Che can be such an ass at times, but when he's actually with Gui Wan, I love their little moments together Besides, I personally feel he deserves a good pat on the back this time round, he has finally cut ties with Consort Ying $(^{\Lambda}_{-}^{\Lambda})$ I mean better late than never haha... although the view of this scene itself was misunderstood in Gui Wan's eyes

Full



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Not A Lotus

I am not a lotus, the lotus is born in mud and is not tainted, washes clear and not demonic, and I, was not born in mud yet already tainted in a body of dirt, officialdom is of chaos, only the white lotus can survive, therefore I am not a lotus, already tainted by demons.

The pouring rain smoothly runs, each drip extending endlessly, the sound of pattering drifting across the entire Capital City, four honoured guests arrives outside the old manor, south of the city, one Jiang Nan silk umbrella, distinguishes the noble status of the arriving person. The side doors of the manor opens, an old servant probes his head out to glance around, immediately opening the red wooden doors, bowing as he invites the person inside, and then carefully looks around the outer area, once he finds nothing out of ordinary, he quietly closes the doors again.

"Gentleman, you have finally come." Fiery Xi Shi suffered half a day of waiting for Gui Wan, hurriedly getting up to greet her, one hand holding up the well brewed tea, personally handing it over to Gui Wan's hands.

The heat warms up her body, a single hand flicking off the traces of rain on her body, Gui Wan turns her head asking: "How has San Niang been recently?"

"Thanks to gentleman's blessing, everything has been going smoothly." Fiery Xi Shi was filled with smiles, catching a glimpse of the two maids Ru Qing, Ru Ming behind Gui Wan, she was somewhat surprised, since she had moved to the Capital, this is the first time she has seen the two following Gui Wan. Ru Qing, Ru Ming slightly nods their heads, counting that as a greeting, because of their inadequate protection last time, resulting in losing Gui Wan, they had received severe punishment upon returning to the Prime Minister Estate, following Gui Wan again this time, they dare not to show any negligence at all, like shadows following the figure, alert at all times.

Only after waving her hand in signal to have all the servants withdraw, did Fiery Xi Shi lead Gui Wan's party, walking up to the loft, beaded curtains serving as a room divider, fresh and elegant, just like a woman's bed chambers, leaving Lou Sheng to wait outside, the four women enters the room.

"Gentleman," Letting Gui Wan sit by the window seat, Fiery Xi Shi turns around and rummages through the bookshelf, picking out a book that looks like an account book, placing it before Gui Wan, reporting in a leisurely manner: "Over the past month, a total of two merchants taking the route from Qu Zhou into the Capital has been purchased and acquired, over twenty warriors has been called upon, amongst them there are three who are of top class; over ten literary people have been called upon, four in particular holds great knowledge and bold vision; over ten people from the three religions and the nine schools of philosophy has been called upon, each has their own individual skills. There is also a list of officials that have been won over in there." All matters, big and small, have all been explained in great detail.

Gui Wan picks up the account book, roughly skimming through two pages, and closes it again, "San Niang's handling of affairs, I can trust." Do not doubt the ones you employ, this principle she is well aware of.

"How did gentleman come to worrying your way over here? Why not wait till the rain has stopped before coming?" This "gentleman" has never been urgent nor panic stricken when doing things, as though her mind is absent, she appears to be more initiative this time, towards grasping hold of the dynamic aspects within the Capital City, she seems extremely enthusiastic.

Gui Wan smiles upon hearing this, looking out of the window, she does not answer. Listening to the constant pitter-pattering of the rain, her heart feeling fed up, it has already been over a month, since she has left the palace, yet there has not been the slightest of movement, day after say, like the calm before the storm, waiting for the thunder to clap, yet not a sound is heard, one sound will certainly leave people shocked. That abnormally demonic emperor, how is he most amiable of the generation? Lou Che also seems to have sensed something, sending back Ru Qing, Ru Ming, to protect her at all times, casting a net called "protection" all around her, wanting to have her safely tucked under his wing. Heart slightly warming up, Gui Wan sounds a light sound of seeming lament, seeming sigh. She is not a white lotus, so how is she to grow out of the mud without being tainted?

"Gentleman," Cutting off Gui Wan's deep thoughts, Fiery Xi Shi takes back the account book that no one looked through, lightly saying, "The matter you told me to find out about, is already showing signs of a positive outcome."

Those words seems to have attracted a great amount of interest from Gui Wan, taking back her eyes that were gazing out afar, her brows slightly twitches, an appearance as though she is all ears.

"This imperial court is split into two factions, it is a fact known by all, one faction is Prince Duan, one faction is Prime Minister Lou, but during this past month, we have exhausted all means, practically looking into every members within the Capital, and finally found that this imperial court is far from being so simple. On the surface, there are two lines within the court, but there is actually another group that is the "protect the emperor" faction, Prince Duan has the unique power of the imperial family, Prime Minister Lou has the power of making military and political decisions, as for the military leadership power, it is held in the hands of the renowned Lin military clan, the Lin clan holds unwavering loyalty, can be said to be the force that the current emperor can truly depend

on.

"The Lin's military forces has been scattered outside the north and southern borders of the Celestial Empire, his majesty wanting to rely on this to protect himself, is it not no different to faraway water sources unable to quench his nearby thirst?" That highly unpredictable Son of Heaven would quietly resign himself to his death just like that?

"That is the second important point that we have found out," Fiery Xi Shi deliberately sells this climatic plot, acting mysterious as she says, "Do you perhaps know, there are some officials within the Capital, appears to belong to Lou, Duan, both parties, but are actually ministers that holds unwavering loyalty to the imperial family?"

"What you mean is, some people could possibly be deliberately placed by Lou, Duan's sides by the his majesty himself?"

"That's right ah, the more I investigate, the more I feel this Capital City truly is a pool of dragons and tigers, impossibly deep." Fiery Xi Shi worriedly sounds a sigh, although she does not know exactly what this "gentleman" is guarding against, but has already revealed a faintly entangled connection with the imperial city.

Gui Wan knits her brows together, "All of this, how did you find out?" If everything really is as San Niang has said, within this officialdom, everyone acting like the enemy of the enemy, then it really is difficult to distinguish them clearly.

"I followed your orders, buying two merchants that takes the route from Qu Zhou into the Capital, these two guilds originally does business with the imperial palace, many goods within the palace has been bought from the outside world through the channels of these two guilds, now they have already been secretly transferred under gentleman's name."

Silently praising her, Gui Wan reveals a smile, politics within the imperial court comes from the bigger hands, whilst women in politics has always shown their prestige from little places, this is the ingeniousness within the battles of intrigues, the so called eight immortals crossing the sea^[1], is nothing more than each making a show of their own supernatural powers.

Seeing her smile spread open, Fiery Xi Shi could not help but to cheer up also, sitting across from Gui Wan, after smiling, her worries once again rises, unable to refrain from mentioning: "Gentleman, why do you have to investigate all this? Could it be....."

This word of could it be did not dare to add anymore words after it, only afraid that seeing the root of all this, she herself will have difficulty in leaving all this chaos.

Seeming to understand the complicated conflicts within San Niang's heart, she lightly savours the clear tea, Gui Wan changes the topic: "San Niang, in your opinion, if his majesty wants to become the sole power holder, what should be done?"

Startled, Fiery Xi Shi looks at Gui Wan in surprise, noticing that she seems to only be curious, and does not have any particular intentions, her crazily pounding heart caused by that shocking question finally settles down, slowly replying: "If this is truly what is wanted, there is only the one method to cut off the powers and rid of the two."

"Then what if he were to gather imperial power within an extremely short amount of time, how could that be done?"

Pondering in silence, Fiery Xi Shi speaks up with difficulty after a long time: "Can only rid of them, and also, for it to be perfectly justifiable, the best way is assassination."

A clear sound of laughter escapes from Gui Wan's sealed lips, looking directly at San Niang, making sense of everything as she says: "Perfectly justifiable? After the assassination, first of all they can announce the passing to the world whilst concealing the reason, even if this is unsuccessful, can also push it onto someone else, framing others, truly a great plan, even the after moves are so perfect."

Fiery Xi Shi feels a chill in her heart, her hair standing on end, only feeling like the rain outside the window are all dripping into her heart, stirring up the confusion within her, whilst also giving rise to an inexplicable sense of fear.

The two of them sits in front of the window, lightly discussing, the dispute within the imperial court, whilst laughing and chatting, pointing out the stormy situation.

A sound of doors opening sounds from the main entrance, Fiery Xi Shi stands up and looks down, under one glance, she appears joyful, turning to Gui Wan, saying: "Almost forgot to tell you, a few days ago, I called for a great talent with great knowledge and bold vision, who applied wanting to see you."

The tea that was raised towards her lips, because of those words, was placed down before it touched her lips, Gui Wan supports her cheek with one hand, thinly smiling, "What? Someone wants to see me?"

"That's right ah, he was able to tell I am not the real one in command at one glance, he applied to see the true master, you see, he has come right now." Fiery Xi Shi who stood leaning against the windowsill, chuckles as she says this.

Struck by an impulse, Gui Wan also stands up, looking down, under one glance, her face suddenly changes slightly, immediately shaking her head, returning to her seat, her smile lightly gathered up, quietly muttering: "Why has he come here?"

Able to hear her whisper, Fiery Xi Shi turns around, feeling puzzled, before she could ask anything, Gui Wan reveals a trace of seeming ridicule, seeming satire, in her elegant smile, "San Niang, dismiss him, don't let him detect anything."

"Could it be that gentleman knows him?" Only from seeing Gui Wan's actions, she already knows that she knows the identity of the person, San Niang inevitably became somewhat curious.

"Not familiar with, but he is actually his majesty's loyal minister......" Sounding a grieving sigh, Gui Wan takes a drink of clear tea, watching San Niang follow her orders to go downstairs and dismiss the person, her eyes appears faintly distant within the steam of the tea, "This rain, just when will it stop?"

"Seems to still not left," Fiery Xi Shi glances downstairs, feeling somewhat interested, "Gentleman, just who exactly is this person?"

"'Wall of Qi Ling' General Lin's military advisor, although a literary man, but has fought on the battlefields for many years, famous for his ingenuity." Gui Wan tirelessly speaks of the person's identity, rotating the porcelain cup in hand. The delicacy of the clear tea has already scattered, the wearing out patience

whilst waiting also follows it in losing its warmth.

"With him waiting at the back door, how are you to leave?" Fiery Xi Shi also senses where the tricky situation lies, silently speculating the purpose of this military advisor's sudden arrival. This place has been going through huge movements throughout the past month, could it be that it has already attracted the court's attention? Looking up, she sees that Gui Wan had already stood up, and was absolutely surprised, "Gentleman?"

Prideful eyes turning to her, laughingly saying: "Since this is how it is, I shall leave through the main doors, leaving honourably."

Fiery Xi Shi was stunned for a moment, a smile spreading to her eyes, during the past month, those main doors, has seen many people coming in and out, even if "gentleman" is to leave through the main doors, it will not attract too much attention, not to mention with the haziness from the rain right now, it makes a natural barrier. Hurriedly standing up, she accompanies Gui Wan's party to the front doors, personally opening up a silk umbrella, handing it to the hands of Ru Qing.

"San Niang, I will leave everything here to you then." Turning around with a smile, Gui Wan carefully asks of her, her figure standing under the umbrella, because of the continuous streams of rain separating them, as though a wall of thread has formed in between, all appears unreal.

The dripping water from the eaves forms a wall, San Niang leaves the rain and fog, staring at that moment, a deep bow, half of her body bent over, her lips not answering anything. The pouring rain, because of this bow, carries three points of dignified colour, but was very soon covered up by the rain. Once San Niang once again lifts her eyes again, not a shadow within the courtyard could be seen, the air left with the lingering light fragrance of red sandalwood, the clear wind and running rain like thread like wire.

Gui Wan steps out of the courtyard, all that can be seen appears to be the misty drizzles, like a painting of leaking ink. Stepping onto this ink like road and coming up to the alleyway, Lou Sheng was already waiting beside the horse carriage, before he could welcome her, an additional silhouette suddenly appears within the alley, positioned between the clutters of raindrops, he

approaches, Ru Qing holds the umbrella in one hand, her hand like a blade, striking at the sudden arrival, Ru Ming immediately reacts, the shadow of her hand makes a swing, following right after. Three hands simultaneously striking at the person.

Ru Qing, Ru Ming's martial arts may not be the best, but it is victorious in the seamless understanding between them, upon working together, their power doubles up even more, with no flaws. But all of this seems to have lost its use when facing the unexpected arrival, rainwater splashes all around, with only a blink of the eyes, the unexpected arrival returns the attack of the two people, and continues to approach. Ru Qing frowns, Ru Ming overturns her hand wanting to attack again, but hears Gui Wan's clear cold voice: "Stop."

Upon hearing this, Ru Ming immediately retracts her hands, withdrawing to the side, gracefully standing there, as though she did not even move just now.

The unexpected arrival also withdraws his fighting stance, the rainwater wetting his clothes, wetting his hair, wetting his forehead, sliding down the outlines of that handsomely cold face, his beautiful and clear eyes exhibiting shock, bewilderment, helplessness, and also slight show of senselessness from the drenching of the rain.

"General Lin." Although the unexpected arrival senses something unusual, Gui Wan still greets him with a smile.

Tightly pressing his lips together, but not saying a single word, only reaching out to take the umbrella from Ru Qing's hand, his voice neither high nor low, saying: "Allow me to accompany Madam for a little walk."

Lightly nodding, Gui Wan gives her consent, abandoning the horse carriage, slowly walking into the pouring rain.

This walk seems to be very long, but also doesn't seem to be as long as one thinks, like a quiet promise, as though settling deep into empty loneliness, the deep silence slowly follows the rainwater, flowing into the heart, the heart filled up with a pool of spring water, yet it does not at all feel calm, green waves slightly raising, expanding rings of ripples that floats above.

He always carries a deeply calm atmosphere around him, even standing next to him can give rise to a sense of trust. The a scene of mistiness before her eyes, with no objects nor figures entering her vision, Gui Wan turns her head, noticing that half of his body is standing within the rain, yet he firmly holds the umbrella over her, lips faintly raising a smile, she parts her lips, about to speak up.

"Madam," After a long silence, Lin Rui En was first to break the dull vibe, eyes firmly locked in front, steadily walking, "Recently, the two merchant channels from Qu Zhou to the Capital has changed ownership overnight, in the southern outskirts of the Capital there is also someone recruiting talents, Military Advisor was occasionally informed, repeatedly reminding me, this is someone establishing eyes and ears within the Capital, although it has not grown big right now, but it will definitely become a new force in the future, advising me to take precautions."

The words she originally wanted to say were not spoken, Gui Wan quietly listens, her face unchanging, her face with not a single bit of abnormality shows not a trace of flaw.

"Military Advisor has already been waiting outside this manor for four days, today he told me, the real one in command will definitely come. Otherwise, they would not so resolutely send him out, I always act accordingly in a fitting and proper way, so I could only stick with the plan of sitting back in hopes of gaining something." [2]

"Truly is a great plan," Gently sounding a laugh, Gui Wan speaks after him, unable to help but to think to herself, this military advisor is indeed formidable, able to assess San Niang's behaviour today, and guess that I have come, such amazing intelligence. And although General Lin's approach is an old strategy, it is still extremely effective. "So, General waited at the alley by the main doors today, and it just happens that the one you were waiting for is me?"

Walking out of the alley, a pale grey brick road jumps into their eyes, Lin Rui En slows down his pace, gradually coming to a stop, turning to face Gui Wan, asking in an unusually firm manner: "Can Madam explain, why you have shown up in this place?"

She had already figured he would ask this, but the moment she hears this, there was still the feeling of being slightly stunned, Gui Wan raises her head, the first thing that meets her eyes is actually Lin Rui En's determined jaw, and then it

was those pair of eyes that, although having fought through many battles, killing countless people, is still able to appear clear and bright, her heart makes flip, leisurely, lightly asking: "Is General suspecting me?"

Lin Rui En's cold expression because of this voice carrying a bit of hidden bitterness, loosens a little, and then immediately fades away, his face revealing a look of hesitation, whatever he originally wanted to say, in the end he refrained from saying it, silently waiting for Gui Wan's explanation.

Secretly lamenting, Gui Wan also feels at a loss as to what to do, speaking up: "General has misunderstood, this manor is the legacy left behind by my late mother, it has once accompanied me through a period of beautiful years throughout my childhood, a month ago, it had already been transferred under the property of another person, me coming here today, is only to see this place filled with memories everywhere, and pay homage to my late mother whilst I am here." Uttering reasons of dignified words yet insincere in substance, seamlessly concealing the truth.

Listening to the reasoning, Lin Rui En was neither surprised nor happy, only indifferently nodding his head lightly a few times, taking a deep look at Gui Wan. "Since this is the case, Madam, it is I who was reckless today, may you excuse my offenses."

Shaking her head twice, Gui Wan accepts it with a smile, the sound of the horse carriage wheels behind is already closing in, Ru Qing, Ru Ming comes forward, looking at Lin Rui En on guard.

"Excuse me for bothering you, a little drizzle can damage your health, quickly go board the carriage." Lin Rui En hands the umbrella in hand over to Gui Wan, gently advising her, such faint show of warmth making a rare appearance on that cold face.

The umbrella handle still carries slight heat, what Gui Wan took hold of seemed to be a piece of warmth, within her pool of deep and calm eyes, there is a slight leak of surprise and guilt, half masking her eyes, she turns around and heads towards the horse carriage. What she originally thought would be an entanglement of interrogation and investigation, actually turned out to come to an end in such a simple way, exactly is this fortunate or unfortunate? Her heart

gives rise to a deep sense of being unable to figure it out, forcing her to have no choice but to take another look back, looking at the Lin Rui En who has his back facing the carriage.

Just one glance only.

Amongst the drizzling rain like silk threads, the entire world is a dim scene of light grey, but that young warrior standing in the rain actually exhibits an independent show of colours within this monochrome world, that face of stern lines clearing up within the haziness, Gui Wan could even clearly see the water beads on his hair slightly tremble along with his movements. Clearly does things independently, yet carries a strong sturdy build; is clearly warm hearted, yet wedges himself between barriers like ice; is clearly so lenient, yet keeps that heart as big as the sea hidden under many layers......

"General, a little drizzle can damage your health."

His entire body coldly allowing the rain to mercilessly hit his body, when all of a sudden, his face loses the cold showering, a sweet laughing tone passes by his ears, the words said are so familiar, Lin Rui En looks back in surprise, and is met with Gui Wan's shallow frown and soft chuckle, holding an umbrella, covering those endless strings of rain.

Unfeelingly accepting the umbrella, also forgetting to say a word of thanking, Lin Rui En watches Gui Wan step onto the horse carriage, the horse's hooves raises, gradually heading faraway, remaining silent for a long while, in the end, when the subject in his eyes disappears from sight, he reveals a hint of an extremely rare display of a bitter smile.



Not knowing how long he stood there for, a wheezing figure comes running in from behind, the splashing raindrop reveals the hastiness of the approaching person: "General, did you already see the mastermind behind everything?" Seeming somewhat excited, hidden with an underlying intention of gloating.

Lin Rui En turns around, seeing the literary man's excessively panting state, his face expressionless, just when the literary man reveals a face filled with a load of questions, he coldly says: "No, I didn't see."

Clearly appearing to not be able to accept this answer, the literary man stares right at him, carefully studying Lin Rui En's face, but cannot see a particularly solemn silence, being very confident in his own intelligence, and is also unwilling to admit his own errors in judgement, he could only deeply frown in distress, calculating in his head where he went wrong. Right in this moment of remaining perplexed despite much thoughts, he raises his head and see that silk umbrella.....silk umbrella?

One doubt after another expanding in his mind, yet the literary man does not speak again to ask anything, his eyes remaining on the umbrella for a while, sounding a hearty laughter: "Since there is no discovery, then forget it, General,

go head back to the estate first." Such smile not reaching those experienced and sharp witted eyes, which instead appears even deeper in thoughts.

In the end did General Lin.....Gui Wan recalls that scene over and over again, is it that lonely back view that was far too heart stirring, or is it that speechless expression when he accepted the umbrella in surprise that sticks in her mind? When thinking back, she cannot help but to wonder, did that reason really convince him? Or.....

"Gui Wan." Lou Che helplessly calls out softly, why is her concentration so lax? Getting distracted several times, making him strangely feel a little flustered and slightly sour, exactly what is making her think so much, hanging on her heart? A frightful sharp flash flickers past under his eyes, it is difficult for him to tolerate anyone or anything lingering in Gui Wan's heart.

Gui Wan does not hesitate to reveal a sweet smile, asking: "What was Husband saying just now?"

Clearly knowing that in face of her smile, he is incapable of keeping a firm stance, he could only helplessly sigh, Lou Che repeats the matter he mentioned before all over again: "Lady Consort Ying is feeling dejected within the palace, his majesty cherishes her, and is determined to accompany her in an recreational incognito tour, the location is Mount Feng (maple mountain) in the northern outskirts, ministers of the imperial court are to bring their families along, monarch and subjects sharing the joy."

The fruit offering in hand lands on the floor upon hearing this, Gui Wan blinks her eyes, her smile fading, lightly asking: "What did Husband say? Monarch and subjects sharing the joy, touring Mount Feng?" When Lou Che affirmatively nods his head in slight shock and bewilderment, a chord in Gui Wan's heart sounds a "peng" before snapping, hundreds of mixed feelings gathering within her chest, that demonic emperor, just exactly what is he planning?

[1] Eight immortals crossing the sea or bā xiān guò hǎi / 八仙过海 — a story symbolising the overcoming of difficulties or doing something marvellous through someone's special skills.

The Eight Immortals are a group of legendary Taoist immortals in Chinese mythology.

This is one of the most fantastic stories about the Eight Immortals. One day, when the Eight Immortals arrive at the East Sea, the sea is extremely rough, with turbulent waves. Lü Dongbin proposes that each immortal cross the sea through his or her special skills by projecting something onto the sea surface. So, Iron Crutch Li throws his instrument-the crutch (or "bottle gourd" in other versions of the story); Han Zhongli hurls his palm-leaf fan; Elder Zhangguo puts his "paper donkey" into the sea and other immortals all cast their own instruments. Thus all of them have successfully crossed the stormy East Sea. Later, the story is used to symbolize overcoming difficulties or doing something marvelous through someone's special skills.

[Credits to: http://www.cultural-china.com/chinaWH/html/en/Traditions43bye178.html]

[2] Sitting back in hopes of gaining something is actually called shǒu zhū dài tù / 守株待兔 which translates to keeping watch at the tree awaiting a rabbit and actually derives from one of the more well-known Chinese idiom stories.

In the state of Song, during the Spring & Autumn period (770–476 B.C.), there lived a farmer who had a tree in his field. Whenever he was tired from working, he would rest under the tree.

One day, while he was working in his field, a panic-stricken rabbit suddenly ran past him, crashed blindly into the tree and died, having broken its neck.

The farmer happily picked up the rabbit, planning to take it home for a delicious rabbit stew dinner.

From then on, he abandoned his plow and no longer worked in his field. He waited by the tree hoping that another rabbit would run into it and die.

However, it did not happen again and the farmer became an object of ridicule. He ended up with nothing and his fields lay fallow and bare.

[Credits to: http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/713602-chinese-idioms-

keeping-watch-at-the-tree-awaiting-a-rabbit-%E5%AE%88%E6%A0%AA%E5%BE%85%E5%85%94/]

This chapter just goes to show why our dear general is the favourite amongst readers, his appearances may be short but they always leave such a strong lasting impression. And I personally feel that this rain scene is probably the most memorable one for me, though it may be just me having a thing for rain scenes in c-novels particularly in an acient setting, the rainy scenes always make some of the most memorable ones haha

I would say that this whole scene perfectly depicts just how bittersweet it is between Gui Wan and General Lin T_T the amount of leniency he shows towards her, despite his own personally strict ideals as a military person, and as a general, the fact that she is somewhat aware of this as well, hence her guilt. The way he protects her is done so quietly, like how he hid her identity as the mastermind, how he held the umbrella for her whilst he was getting wet, but it just says so much about his character in this novel. Sigh, the guardian angel who deserves so much more.

Full

Note: Huáng Shàng / 皇上 means your majesty — how one would address the emperor, and because Chinese wording often works the other way around to English wording, the addressing of Gentleman (Gōng Zǐ / 公子) comes after the person's surname, so the addressing of Huang Shang can easily be corrected to Huang Gong Zi (Gentleman Huang), but for the purpose of keeping to the flow of the story here you may find that I added addressment of Gentleman after the "surname" in some areas, for example "Huang Gentleman"

The correcting of Huang Shang to Huang Gong Zhi happens quite often in dramas when the Emperor is incognito outside of the palace grounds so many of you may already know this, but I just wanted to start by explaining this grammatical error for those who may not know



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Secret Battle

Feel that in the mortal world, everything will come to autumn, all shaken down. [1]

Feng Shan (maple mountain) in the northern area of the Capital City, is famous for its entire mountain of red leaves, every autumn, leaves continues to endlessly fall across this boundless land, such scenery half dyed in red, attracts many

visitors here, someone has once poetically described this: "Gently lingering in the autumn wind, the red leaves of Feng Shan descends."

Feng Shan today seems to be particularly lively, during this early morning, a group of esteemed guests have arrived at the foot of the mountain, dressed in silk clothing, golden headdress with jade belts, dressed in whole bodies of extraordinary worth, along the way, they have attracted many watchful eyes. The mountain visitors were all speculating the identity of these people, no one would have thought that they are royalty and noble gentlemen from within the Capital City being accompanied by beauties as they tour Feng Shan together.

The entire group sits in the teahouse at the foot of the mountain, quenching their thirst, chatting and joking around, planning to get a little rest first, before they go up Feng Shan.

"The scenery of this Feng Shan is indeed phenomenal," Lightly swaying the paper fan in hand, Zheng Liu carries a warming smile as he asks the other people, "What does everyone think of it?"

In fact, most of the accompanying officials has lived in the Capital City for many years, the scenery of this place, they have already seen it before, but with the Emperor asking this, not one person did not put on a joyful smile, competitively fighting for the first praise, to match up with the Emperor's aesthetic mood.

The Third Ranked Scholar^[2] in the same class of year as Guan Xiu Wen, has always struggled for a chance to present himself, to actually catch onto the opportunity for flattery, he immediately steps forward, a straight face saying: "I have always thought that the Three Greatest Sceneries in the world, without Feng Shan, is indeed a great pity."

The officials were speechless, within officialdom, flattery, shameless bootlicking is but a basic requirement, but to only touch and go, leaving behind no traces, such is the true essence to it, this new Third Ranked Scholar speaks so exaggeratingly, all the officials were secretly laughing inside, cynically watching on, waiting to see how he will make a fool of himself.

Seeing everyone watching him, the Third Ranked Scholar grows complacent, even his voice had tuned three points higher: "A scene of red dyes Feng Shan,

such magnificent scenery, is able to rival that of the Three Greatest Sceneries, but when the Three Greatest Sceneries were chosen, Feng Shan was actually not included amongst them, is this not odd? I propose that Huang......Gentleman should write a petition, to have Feng Shan included amongst the Four Greatest Sceneries."

Zheng Liu faintly smiles but says nothing, the entire group of officials secretly chuckles, the Three Greatest Sceneries were appointed by the people of the world, Feng Shan may be beautiful, but also falls very short, to impose such idea right now, afraid that one must want to become the laughing stock, it just so happens that this Third Ranked Scholar is uninformed, and is even rather proud of himself.

"Gentleman Liu's words are absolutely right ah." Thin lips hooking up into a smile, Lou Che's eyes like the night skies looks directly at the Third Ranked Scholar, speaking his praises.

Hearing Lou Che's words, the Third Ranked Scholar's smile spreads even more, to receive the imperial court's Prime Minister Lou's appreciation, how could he still be afraid of not being able to rapidly go up the ranks in future? His lips modestly saying: "Not at all, not at all."

"The other three sceneries have all become famous with the mentioning in writings of reputable literary people, since you are full of praises towards the scenery of this place, how about this, you stay here, raise your brush in composition of a literary piece, when we come back down the mountain, not only would we have explored the scenery of Feng Shan, but will also get to admire your excellent writing, is this not better?"

Hearing up to here, he too comes to understand the underlying meaning behind Lou Che's words, face stiffening, suddenly pale, suddenly red, lightly saying: "But.....this....."

"Come, prepare brush, ink and paper, allow Gentleman Liu to compose a good piece of writing." Upon hearing this order, the disguised imperial guards immediately steps forward from the side, with the Emperor and officials travelling in disguise this time, everything that has been brought along is left to the imperial guards and domestic servants to carry, hearing the orders, they take

out the brush, ink and paper, placing it to one side.

At this moment, how could anyone possibly continue to hold it in? Immediately roaring out in laughter.

Seeing this Third Ranked Scholar Liu's face like that of sour pickles, it is just too funny, causing the laughter to well up, even Gui Wan couldn't hold it back, laughing out loud.

"Is your heart feeling at ease now?" Lou Che whispers as he turns his head to Gui Wan, those calm eyes glowing with tenderness. Thinking of how much Gui Wan seems to have been worrying since this morning, gloom overcasting her face, his heart was absolutely pained, always wanting to think of a way to make her laugh, wholeheartedly laughing out loud.

Lightly nodding her head, Gui Wan smiles, pitying that Third Ranked Scholar Liu, who fails to understand why he has been publicly mocked by Lou Che, containing a smile as her eyes glances elsewhere, she meets eyes with Consort Ying who had her attention over here, those eyes seemingly quiet, seemingly resentful, and Zheng Liu next to her is also carrying a slight smile, with a complete appearance of gentleness and well-cultured demeanour.

Gui Wan quietly gathers up her smile, the autumn wind brushing against her face, actually bringing with it, a trace of chilliness.

What exactly is he scheming?

.....

Once the entire party was done chatting around, other than that Third Ranked Scholar Liu, everyone sets off along the mountain path that spirals upwards.

Originally a great day with clear autumn skies and crisp air, thousands of li with no clouds, the cloudless sky washed blue, laughter and joy all along the way, as times goes by, Gui Wan's heart also gradually settles down, a day of fun for both monarch and subjects flies by in a blink of an eye, the sun descends into the west mountains, half leaving behind an afterglow, it is already time to head down the mountain.

"Huang......Gentleman, it should be time to return now." Li gong-gong's shrill voice gently reminds.

"That's right ah," Someone interrupts from the side, "Perhaps, Gentleman Liu has already written out his literary piece, heading down the mountain to admire such is also of great aesthetics." Everyone bursts into a roars of laughter again.

Taking the same route back, all the female partners were a little tired, their walking speed slowing down, walking down half the mountain, the usually greatly pampered senior officials were all tired from walking all day, and could only stop and take a short break.

"Strange....." Minister of Personnel Yan Gang lightly beats his legs, whilst muttering to himself.

A few people turns their heads over, a tall official asks in wonder: "What is Old Yan looking at?"

Yan Gang raises his hand and says to the person not far from him: "Look, it is already almost evening now, why are there still people heading up the mountain? And there is so many people coming up too."

Several people looks over towards the mountain path, indeed a group of people has come, the tall official sneers and says: "Probably someone is in the mood to enjoy the night scenery, it is not a bad idea ah." His words led to the laughter of many, these officials are usually this arrogant, often finding people to make fun of and does not even feel that anything is wrong with it.

The group of people are getting closer and closer, in a blink of an eye, they already reached the halfway point of the mountain, even the Emperor and his courtiers who were sat in the distance came to realise this, Lin Rui En walks closer a little, carefully looking over the approaching people, after a moment of observation, solemnly appearing stern, he coldly shouts: "Heads up, on guard."

The imperial guards immediately surrounds them in a circle upon hearing orders, the officials who were still laughing and poking fun at the situation also pales, backing themselves towards the Emperor's side, that arrogant attitude instantly wiped clean without a trace. The noisiness immediately disappears.

Waiting till that group of people was in close proximity, turns out it is a local landowner leading a group of aggressive retainers up the mountain, and even loudly shouts: "Go catch that shameless little bitch for me, let me see where she can go hiding to....."

Such matter is already considered commonly occurance, they presume that that local landowner's concubine must have eloped with someone, fleeing into the mountains. Everyone lets out a huge sigh in relief, and cannot help but to grow annoyed of Lin Rui En making such a fuss, the tension from before immediately loosens up, their ridiculing attitudes once again resurfacing.

The local landowner's party and the Emperor's party passes by each other on the same path.

Just when everyone treated it like a joke and took it positively, a shocking turnover hits.

Within a mere moment, the one who looks like a local landowner suddenly turns back, his hand holding a bomb, a trail of grey smoke spreads towards the Emperor's party, the officials who were nearest, had not even the time to cry out, and had already fallen to the ground. The few who reacted quickly all moves closer towards the Emperor, seeming in search of shelter, Li gong-gong seems to have been completely stunned, loudly shouting out: "There's assassins! Guard his majesty——"

The scene immediately turns into chaos, the group dressed as retainers pulls out their sabres and swords, charging towards the centre of the resting team, the guards responds quickly, circling around them, standing in front of the Emperor and courtiers, blades meets blades with the disguised assassins, within that moment, the clashing of metal rings throughout the entire area.

Assassination? This thought quickly flashes past Gui Wan's mind, freezing for a moment, she immediately turns to Lou Che, "Husband?"

Seeing that these assassins are remarkably fierce, the imperial guards' protective circle grows smaller and smaller, the mood within Lou Che's dark eyes cannot be read, reaching out to stroke Gui Wan's face, he turns his head shouting out: "Protect Madam." Lou Sheng and two others steps forward upon hearing the order, the weapons in their hands thoroughly ready.

The sounds of fighting is already brushing by his ears within a blink of an eye, Lou Che sweeps his eyes across the entire scene, suddenly spotting a panicking official hiding by the Emperor's side, a hint of smile floats to the surface of his lips, loudly shouting towards that official: "Your majesty, careful assassin!"

As soon as his voice was heard, the assassins swiftly moves inwards, all charging towards that person. That pitiful official who had already been scared out of their wits, is even more frightened right now, unable to utter a single word, his mouth widely hangs open, only able to emit sounds of whining and choked back sobs.

The assassins were either slashing or slicing, in a life for a life manner, the imperial guards were losing their grounds, and have even changed their target, the situation remains extremely critical. Lin Rui En stands by the Emperor's side, a sliver sword clenched in hand, light and shadow flashing by with every strike, killing off any who comes close, blood splatters in all directions, a bloody stench diffusing into the air.

Standing by the Emperor's side, the shadows of sabres, shadows of swords, shadows of people, all confusingly flies by the eyes, unrestrainable tension and panic rushes up Yao Ying's heart, the hand originally holding onto the Emperor's has unknowingly let go, wildly looking all around.....where is he?

Not this one.....nor that one.....they're all not it. Where is he? Need to find him.....must definitely find him.....

Head slightly turning to the side, turns out he is just three steps away, calmly directing other people, I found him.....this is great, I found him.....grabbing onto him this time, never letting go again.....never letting go......

Sleeve suddenly sinking down, Lou Che looks back in surprise, ".....Lady Consort Ying?"

"Lady Consort Ying, it is safer to retreat back," Lou Che knits his brows together, showing his impatience, "Let go!"

No! Cannot let go.....her heart seem to have only left behind this one faith, like grabbing onto the last straw before she drowns, Yao Ying stubbornly grabs onto Lou Che, her tears have already blurred her vision, it seem like only the thing she is grabbing onto can give her a moment of security, trust and warmth, that is why she need to firmly hold on.....

Within this hectic moment, he cannot attend to much, the assassin has already came before Lou Che's eyes, the shadow of the blade shaking, actually coming towards his face, a sound of ringing metal, horizontally intercepting the attack,

preventing the potential slashing, Lou Sheng charges in front of Lou Che protectively, "Lord Prime Minister, are you alright?"

"What are you doing, didn't I leave you to protect Madam?" Lou Che's raised voice carries agitation, hurriedly looking towards the left, Gui Wan was actually not at the original spot, his face slightly changes, those cold eyes glaring at Lou Sheng.

Lou Sheng swings his blade, whilst taking advantage of a quick interlude to answer: "Lord Prime Minister may rest assure, Madam has been retreated to a safe place."

Heart slightly easing up, the situation is chaotic, he cannot look back, and even has a heavy burden next to him that he cannot discard aside, the aggravation in his heart was unspeakable, it just so happens that this situation is of special circumstances, he cannot lose him temper, and can only calmly look over the scene again, his eyes darkens, this matter.....seems a little odd.

Whilst following the Prime Minister Estate guards to the back, Gui Wan keeps her attention on the fight scene, the fierceness of the assassins is extremely similar to the phantom soldiers. The situation is critical, whilst retreating, she continues to look back, suddenly catching a glimpse of a figure, is that not Consort Ying? Stunned with terror, her head collides into a figure, looking up, it is actually Zheng Liu.

Coldly watching over the entire scene, Zheng Liu's expression was deep and heavy, seeing Gui Wan approach, a light satirical smile emerges: "What, Madam also came to protect the Emperor?"

Pressing her lips together, Gui Wan does not refute, just indifferently glancing at him, before returning her gaze back to the situation.

The situation gradually turns for the better, Lin Rui En's sword swift like flashing lights, blocking off any threats that can harm Zheng Liu and Gui Wan, the imperial guards after all is rich in experience, well-trained, not long after the fighting started, Lou Che on one hand, had already kept the situation under control, the Prime Minister Estate guards surrounds the leading assassin who is dressed as a local landowner, sure enough, this distracted the assassins'

attention, and also spiritually scattered them.

The other guards are all Lin Rui En's personal attendants, have been on the battlefields for many years, in terms of perseverance and fighting spirit, they are all of the best warriors, over time, they display their formidability, the majority of the assassins were either killed or captured.

Yet the assassin leader remains stubborn, despite being surrounded, he is still exerting his force and spirit to wrestle.

Lin Rui En kills off all those that have come near, his body of lightly coloured Confucianism robe has actually been dyed blood red now, the traces of blood stains extremely horrifying, his wrist makes a slight move, throwing off the blood on the soft-edged sword, seeing the assassin leader and guards fighting it out into a circle, his killing intent immediately raises, wanting to go up, he turns his head to report to the Emperor, under one glance, he actually sees a touch of a familiar figure, heart hit with surprise, he freezes on the spot, the chilliness on his face fades away, withdrawing the soft-edged sword behind him.

It was in this moment, that the assassin leader sounds a roar, springing towards the official who was mistaken for the Emperor, everyone all shocked, before they even had the chance to scream, Lin Rui En flips his hand, shooting the soft-edged sword in hand over, with the interference of a silver light, the assassin leader was blocked off, the force of the sword piercing into the official's arm, fresh blood dripping, the official's throat could not produce a single sound, before fainting on the spot.

The guards immediately goes up front, capturing the assassin leader that is dressed as a local landowner alive.

The fierce fighting lasted half-a-pot-of-tea time, but feels like half a day, the originally bright and beautiful scenery of red leaves, has actually been overshadowed by the flashing of swords right now, a foul wind carrying bloody rain. Corpses lies all over the mountainside, amongst them, there were also several officials who had been gassed unconscious. The guards promptly had their injuries treated, even the relatively calm senior officials, also felt the lingering fear after the fighting, their sluggish expressions sunken into gloom, the aesthetic mood from touring the mountain had already drifted beyond the

highest level of heaven, disappearing without a trace.

Gui Wan watches as Lin Rui En captures that assassin leader and heads into the distant to interrogate him, only then did her heart settle down, turning back towards Lou Che, the moment her eyes settles, her heart sank, secretly crying out "this is bad" inside.

Yao Ying was spilling tears as she clutches onto Lou Che, that bitterly helpless look, makes people's heart grieve at the sight. The situation has calmed down, several officials who stood at a closer proximity were first to discover this scene, following on, more and more doubtful and surprised eyes were directed towards the two people, but because one is the current court's Grand Secretary, one is the doted consort of the back palace, they did not dare to casually speak of it, only able to secretly observe, leaving the muttering in their hearts.

This bizarre and undistinguishable atmosphere very quickly spreads across the entire mountainside, sound of quiet murmuring floods the place, everyone seems to have already pushed the attempted assassination incident to the back of their minds, and instead grew greatly interested in the strange situation before their eyes.

Lou Che tightly knits his brows together, under everyone's watchful eyes, it is not like he can throw off Yao Ying with great force, noticing that all eyes are overtly and covertly watching secretively, he already feels somewhat impatient and angered, sending eye signals to the two people beside him, the two guards hurries forward, one on each side grabbing Consort Ying's arms, they practically had to forcefully yank her off, to separate Consort Ying from Lou Che's side. Consort Ying was originally blanked out, only wanting to grab onto her only hope, surprised by the external force just now, her mind immediately clears up, looking all around, she freezes on the spot, docilely not daring to say anything.

The current situation is already considered extremely awkward, everyone simultaneously turns to the Emperor, wanting to pick out a clue from looking at his expression.

Zheng Liu still carrying that warm smile, says to Lou Che and Consort Ying: "Minister Lou and Beloved Consort, is everything alright?" That tone very gracious, as though it is able to warm people's hearts.

Gui Wan feels a chill run up her spine, looking at the nearby Zheng Liu with that flawlessly fake kindness, even more so feeling deep and heavy, deep down she knows, him questioning like this, highlights his own innocence, and also have all condemnation pushed onto Lou Che and Consort Ying.

Sure enough, a discerning eye is able to see the mystery behind this type of situation, right now, to see the Emperor still seem to be kept in the dark, their eyes turns back to Lou, Ying with an addition of condemnation and contempt, and towards that monarch, they could only sympathise with him, there were even some of the more powerful ministers, who began to question, is Prime Minister Lou's power too great? In the dark, everyone's hearts gives rise to a mood filled with concerns.

Lou Che loosens his brows, lowering his body in a respectful bow, answering in a smooth and steady tone: "Thanking your majesty for such concern, Lady Consort Ying was swept away from your majesty just now, grabbing onto this subject insisting to return to your majesty's side, it has but made this subject overly worried....."

This pleasantly smooth voice entering the ears, has eased some of the atmosphere from before, but everyone although has temporarily solved their doubts, the scene from before has been deeply engraved in their hearts, their mouths say nothing, but the potential problems have been planted.

It was in this atmosphere of a bizarre and complex situation, that Lin Rui En comes back from the other side of the mountain, bending into a bow, he says: "Your majesty, do you want personally interrogate the assassin?"

Zheng Liu sterns his face upon hearing this, folding the fan in hand, he lightly touches his chin, leisurely saying: "Bring him over."

The assassin leader was very quickly brought over with his hands tied behind his back, all the officials has seen his fierceness just before, although he has been captured now, but that air of ferocity still remains, one after another, they turn their heads away, not daring to look.

A sound of "pu tong" as he drops to his knees, the guards standing on the sides. Zheng Liu also takes a close look at the man, asking: "Who was it that sent you?"

Up until now, did he finally realise he had killed the wrong subject, a look of surprised flying past his eyes, disappearing in a flash, his lips remains sealed. Upon seeing the situation, the guards at the side unleashes the whip, severely slashing at the assassin leader's chest, a trail of blood is revealed under the already tattered clothing, streams of blood dripping, forget saying the accompanying women could not bear to watch this, even most officials, were making a show of their pitiful states.

The assassin leader sure is truly a man of dauntless bravery, not even a gulp can be heard, still that face of leaving the monarch to dispose of him, no pain, no itch, seeing this situation, all the guards were gritting their teeth in hatred, but it is not like they can do anything.

Zheng Liu knits his brows, his eyes locked onto that assassin leader, silently. Lou Che originally wanted to lay down a command, but thinking back to the situation just now, it is not the right time to speak up right now, his eyes quietly darkens, pressing his lips together, saying nothing.

"Looks like you truly are a man of dauntless bravery, I cannot bear to harm you, I believe you must also have your own parents, spouse and children back home, should you be inflicted any harm, would it not pain their hearts?" Such moving words, hoping to open up that kneeling man's soft spot.

The assassin leader's expression instantly loosens up a bit, adjusting his position, dumbly speaking: "You need not keep up the farce, I will not tell you master's name." His tone seems to have already faltered from the firmness of before.

"It does not matter even if you do not say it, I will not force you, but what I really do not understand is, where have I offended you people, to require lives in exchange for lives?" Zheng Liu innocent tone along with his elegantly refined outer appearance, even his expression was penetrating, as though it is able to make one sense his heartache and innocence, "Exactly who could have wanted to assassinate me?"

Gui Wan was slightly shocked by his long drawn out tone, the moment she turns her head, she sees that Zheng Liu's lips covered under his fan has clearly hooked up into a faint smile, extremely devilish.

Li gong-gong who stood at the side, immediately understood the Emperor's hint, immediately following on: "Your majesty, it can't be.....Prince Duan right?"

Once those words were spoken, all was rendered shocked, before anyone can produce any sound, that assassin leader was already stunned, those sharp eyes turning deep, looking towards the Emperor in surprise. Everyone upon seeing this, speechlessly freezes on the spot, this assassin leader's expression has undoubtedly confirmed the previous speculation, suddenly, the mountainside bursts into an uproar of mumblings.

This time's mountain tour, Prince Duan indeed did not come, could it be.....the one who wanted to assassinate the Emperor, really is Prince Duan?

Heart suddenly hit with a pang, Gui Wan looks towards Lou Che, only seeing his face expressionless, looking as though the matter does not concern him, although deep down she understands he probably would not say anything, would not ask anything, but within an instant, her heart still starts panicking.

Since the ancient times, the control of the imperial court, has always been based on the counterbalance of principles, the power forces within the court should never be tilting to one side, only such nailing of power, can maintain the stability within the imperial court. And with Prince Duan being fessed up right now, the power that Prince Duan represents is extremely likely of being reduced to naught due to his involvement in this matter, to Lou Che, this matter can only be half joy half worries, now that the situation has already generated a subtle change, although it cannot be visibly seen, Gui Wan makes the speculation from the depths of her heart, that in between this moment of joy and worries, one can only be afraid that the worries weighs heavier.....

The entire ground of red leaves trembles in the wind, dyed with blood, it starts to appear more and more bleak, dozens of eyes were either surprised, taunting, or excited, various types of undercurrents swarming over. Standing by the Emperor's side, being swept across by these eyes, she could feel a wave of inner turmoil, Gui Wan gently bites down on her lower lip, seeing General Lin ask that captured assassin leader something again, his voice drifting past her ears, but not at all reaching her mind.

"Looks like Madam Lou has received quite a fright....." Being mentioned by

Zheng Liu, Gui Wan snaps out of it, seeing everyone carry looks of sympathy towards her. A glance at the ground, that assassin leader is already no longer there, and only then did she realise her mind had wandered off for quite some time already.

"Thanking your majesty for such concern, it was indeed extremely dangerous just before." Acting delicately frail can also be regarded as a great way to escape this complicated turbulence.

"To let so many people receive a fright in an encounter of danger, really is of the most atrocious sin, I will definitely not let the mastermind behind all this go so easily." Zheng Liu's eyes wanders around the gathering of officials, asking, "Then who will be the best person to hand this case over to?"

Yet another hot potato thrown right at them, clearly aware that this matter involves Prince Duan, who could possibly dare to casually stand up in acceptance of this case? Whilst all the officials were exchanging glances, they simultaneously lower their heads, avoiding the Emperor's probing eyes. Once those words were spoken, not one person answered after a long time.

In the end, his eyes could only land onto Lou Che, Zheng Liu lightly laughs, "Looks like we have to once again trouble Minister Lou."

Once those words entered Gui Wan's ears, it more or less carried a little flavour of ridicule, her heart feeling greatly at discomfort, as though something is stuck in it, yet Lou Che's completely emotionless voice enters her ears: "Yes, this subject shall endeavour to comply to the imperial order."

Up to this point, matters have finally come to an end, the guards were busily dealing with the aftermaths, the officials who were in a moment of absurdity also recovered their state of mind a little, only that Consort Ying is sticking out over there, in such tender and frail state, very pitiful, even the Emperor did not seem to remember her, not paying her much attention, amongst the officials, not one would dare to speak up to touch upon this topic, Gui Wan slowly makes her way back to Lou Che's side, ordering Lou Sheng to lend a supporting hand to help Consort Ying make her way back, only then did they resolve the strange and awkward situation of her standing by the Emperor's side, and Consort Ying standing by Lou Che's side.

In the end, Lou Che did not speak again, neither angry nor happy, putting on a full appearance of staying aloof, until they stepped onto the carriage for their return, did he finally reveal the slightest bit of emotion, sunken into a deep and heavy mood, he gently says to Gui Wan: "Gui Wan, you temporarily leave the Capital, go take a break at your older brother's place for a while, how's that?" Hand reaching her cheek, affectionately lingering there.

Abruptly, her chest overflows with an ominous feeling, she returns his gaze, Gui Wan very determinedly shakes her head, "No I want to stay here." The underlying currents within the Capital is already revealing its menacing aura, among the sea of officialdom, one either sinks or floats, an instance of win or lose set, how could she possibly not know of this principle, knowing that Lou Che is making this move to protect her, it is not that she does not appreciate his care, it's just that she is terrified inside, terrified that escaping right now, will definitely become a lifetime's regret.

A tide of sourly astringent feelings quietly surges up, Gui Wan extends her hand and clasps onto Lou Che's palm, softly saying: "Fortune or misfortune is difficult to anticipate, but I intend to follow you either way." Her pupils appears very faint, yet it did not lose its sparkle, she spreads a smile like that of flowers.

Lou Che's eyes deepens even more, sounding a sigh, he gently pulls Gui Wan into his embrace, without a word, his other hand lifting up the carriage curtains, several other horse carriages were slowly running next to them, Gui Wan looks out along with him, the largest, most magnificent carriage is not far from them, the Emperor must be secretly laughing inside it right? Thinking this, her anger rises, lightly harrumphing.

"Gui Wan, Prince Duan may be domineering, but the possibility of him plotting this, only holds a very minimal chance." Slow and leisurely stating this by Gui Wan's ear side, Lou Che was very reasonable.

"Someone set him up?" Since the beginning, she had felt that something was not right, no matter how stupid Prince Duan can get, one would still not act so recklessly like this. Although this thought had rolled past her mind thousands of times, to blurt it out right now, she still felt a biting chill, this Emperor, in order to concentrate his imperial power, he wouldn't really begin to eliminate the other power holders right?

"Prince Duan is not a lamp that will conserve oil, this matter is not at all easy to resolve." Lou Che with unchanging gentle warmth, contains a smile as he makes his analysis, "The Capital is about to go through yet another major change, with you here, I cannot feel at ease, it is better to leave here."

No longer beating around the bush to persuade her, Lou Che directly speaks his thoughts clearly, just wanting to send the lead to his heart, the fastening of his heart off to a safe place, "Wait till this storm has past, and I shall fetch you back."

Throwing away his hand upon hearing this, Gui Wan straightens up her body, glaring at him with slight anger, "Would leaving the Capital guarantee complete safety? I'm not leaving, only this time, I will definitely not listen to you."

There seems to be no room for negotiation, Lou Che looks at Gui Wan firmly unwavering expression, also feeling a sense of helplessness, the two of them could only stop discussing this matter, carelessly dragging it out, the horse carriage has already stopped in front of the Prime Minister Estate.

Having returned to the Prime Minister Estate, the housekeeper already had dinner prepared, Gui Wan was also indeed hungry, in the circumstance of not being in a good mood, she still had a good appetite to eat a filling meal, having only finished eating, the housekeeper comes in with wine, placing it on the table, Lou Che personally pours a cup, handing it over to Gui Wan, advising: "Today you received a fright and caught the chill, drink some wine, warm up your body, and drive away the chilly air."

Gui Wan accepts the wine, seeing him pour himself a cup of wine too, she raises her head to see those eyes looking at her with affection flowing out, traces of sweetness floats up her heart, the wine flows into her mouth, the taste of mellow wine spreading out, causing her to sigh in praising. Lou Che faintly smiles, the two of them chatting cheerfully over the dinner table, it appears that all unpleasant matters of today have been forgotten, since they got married, this is the happiest dinner they had together.

Gui Wan was leisurely full of smiles, whilst telling a joke, she could only feel her head grow more and more heavy, her vision gradually blurs, silhouettes unclear, as though her voice just about forced itself out: "The wine....."

Lou Che steps forward to support her drooping body, with unlimited tenderness, he says: "Gui Wan, in Jin Yang wait for me to collect you." The person in his arms sinks into dreamland, he hugs her, unmoving for a long long time, staring at her sleeping face with extreme reluctance, up until the time can no longer be delayed any further, the night passes by, the skies have already started to brighten up, and only then did he lift Gui Wan's body and carry her out of the courtyard, Lou Sheng had already long been waiting aside.



In the early morning, from the Prime Minister Estate's back door, a horse carriage drives out, the raising hooves hurtling forward.

A burst of bumpy sensation sinks deeper and deeper into her mind, Gui Wan's eyes abruptly opens wide, entering her vision is the carriage interior, memories of moment leading to her falling unconscious slowly returns to her mind, lightly gritting her teeth, she lifts the carriage curtains, Lou Sheng's back which was in direct view was fully set on hurrying the carriage.

"Stop the carriage." Gui Wan loudly orders, because of the slight agitation, even her voice has lost its calm.

Turning a deaf ear as he continues to drive forward, Lou Sheng's back view appears unusually firm, "Madam, please be bear with it, we shall be reaching Jin Yang in two days."

Gui Wan is greatly surprised upon hearing this, thinking that she had already left the Capital for over two days, her heart grows even more anxious, seeing the

scenery on both sides flying past, her thoughts rapidly turns, raising the curtains high up, she takes on a stance as if to jump.

Sensing the movement of the person behind, Lou Sheng starts sweating in fear, desperately pulling at the reins, an urgent cry comes from the horse's mouth, the carriage drags on a little, before coming to a stop. Lou Sheng hastily jumps down from the carriage, only after seeing Gui Wan sitting in the carriage unharmed, did he slowly sighs in relief, respectfully saying: "Madam, Lord Prime Minister has already ordered, to get you to Jin Yang first no matter what."

A fuming face as she sits in the carriage, Gui Wan lightly sounds a "heng", lightly saying: "Turn back, return to the Capital." No matter how big the world is, it is still of the Emperor's land, if Lou Che is to lose this battle, no matter where she is to flee to, it will still be difficult for her to be spared.

Both knees makes a bend, Lou Sheng kneels on the ground, persuading: "Madam, this little person has been entrusted by Lord Prime Minister, and dares not to disobey." A long while later, he hears not the slightest sound of a reply, Lou Sheng finds it strange, his line of vision from his lowered head actually catches sight of a pair of exquisitely made silk shoes landing before him, he raises his head in bewilderment: "Madam....."

"Pa—", a palm smacks across Lou Sheng's face, his face was not in pain, but his brain froze at that very moment, the blood running in his body also seems to have frozen.

"We are wasting our time here, the Capital might have already been turned upside down by now, how could you be this muddled up, with the skin gone, where is the hair to attach itself, such principle, do you not understand? The one that truly grasps hold of fate is not the heavens, not the earth, not the Emperor, but is oneself." Gui Wan bitterly smiles as she says this, her tone a little high, "Quickly turn back, we're returning to the Capital." Not giving him any chance to reject.

Stunned by Gui Wan's short phrases of lecturing, he has never seen this cloudlike woman be so strict and talkative, each sound of light scolding like a wakeup call, Lou Sheng hurriedly stands up, offering a supporting hand for Gui Wan to ascend the carriage, he mercilessly raises the whip, pulling the reigns at a turn, and the carriage turns around, bolting forward down the road they came from.

The nonstop bumpiness seemed to no longer be of the carriage, but her own heart, a bitter smile faintly floats to her face, Gui Wan closes her eyes, carefully thinking over the assassination attempt they encountered on Feng Shan.

Making their way back down the same route, took another two days' worth of time, waiting until the horse carriage rushed into the Capital City, it was already early morning, the carriage wheels rolls across the clear grey stone paving, emitting a sliding noise, Gui Wan in a drowsy state, was half dreaming, half awake, in a moment of haziness, she hears a burst of clamouring, abruptly awakening from her light sleep, the horse carriage suddenly comes to a stop.

"Madam," Lou Sheng's voice was full of hesitation, "That seems to be the imperial troops ahead....."

Lifting the curtains to take a look, the streets of the Capital City was actually filled with the imperial soldiers, endlessly flooding the area, Gui Wan upon taking a look all around, actually finds a familiar figure, such outstandingly valiant bearing, that does not stand inferior to the males, lightly frowning, she blurts out: "Lin Ran Yi?"

Only upon seeing that it is actually her, did she understand why Lou Sheng's voice just now was so strange, Gui Wan's suspicions instantly rises, the Lin military clan is divided into two, one guards the Capital, one guards the borders, very rarely do they appear together in the same place, Lin Ran Yi's sudden appearance within the Capital, could this be under the secret summoning of the Emperor?

"Madam, they seemed to have besieged the Prince Duan Estate."

"Let us follow along and take a look." Throwing out the command without hesitation, Gui Wan was also somewhat curious, after being absent for four days, exactly what changes has occurred within the Capital now?

The horse carriage slowly follows behind the imperial troops, Lou Sheng slows down the speed, afraid that Lin Ran Yi will notice, in a very complicated mood, he trails them all the way to the front doors of Prince Duan Estate.

The former days of endless flows of traffic^[3], courtyards bustling like a market,

is partially cold and deserted right now, as though no one is interested, the lion stone sculptures has also lost its fangs within this ghostly atmosphere, in preparation to appear desolate, the large red doors were open wide, the imperial troops going in and out, busying back and forth, Gui Wan sits within the carriage, one hand supporting her cheek, paying full attention as she watches on.

Box after box is carried out from within Prince Duan Estate, soldiers of the imperial army had faces carrying a somewhat mocking smile, Gui Wan inwardly laments, these imperial soldiers would usually be extremely cautious and trembling when they enter the Prince Duan Estate, today it really is a situation of fate making its turn.

A very long time passes, a group of people have been detained from within the Prince Duan Estate, all dressed in silk clothing and brocade belts, male and female, with a total of twenty people, amongst them there was even an approximately four years old child, who, when being brought out by the soldiers, was crying out loud, such piercing cries, breaks one's heart upon hearing it. Gui Wan carefully looks over the crowd again, Prince Duan was actually not in sight, she was secretly surprised.

"Madam....." Lou Sheng quietly calls out, "Look over there, it seems to be Lord First Ranked Scholar."

The youth's figure suddenly enters her line of sight, Gui Wan was startled, the last one to come out from within the Prince Duan Estate is actually him. Gui Wan can vaguely remember, the first time she had seen him, he was a refreshingly elegant youth within the trees, such crystal clearness giving her a feeling that he cannot get tainted, was all this just an illusion?

Lin Ran Yi and the Capital's superintendent of the imperial guards steps forward, the superintendent was even flattering to the most extreme, yet Guan Xiu Wen coldly shows a face of indifference, the three people standing at the entrance discussing something, before the Capital's superintendent hurries off again.

Simply unable to believe her own eyes, Gui Wan gazes at the scene half shocked, half suspicious, is this really the simple and naïve youth who was reciting {{Spring Thoughts}}? Could it be that official robes worn on the body, can really make one lose their original nature, officialdom is so filthy, that even a white lotus can also transform into mud?

"Madam.....the imperial army is almost done searching, it is best that we leave whilst it's still early." The horse carriage standing within the alley, is not at all completely safe.

Nodding in agreement, she let down the curtain, Gui Wan leans back into the carriage, no longer able to sleep, her heart endlessly swirling, within four days, could it be that everything really has gone through huge changes?

"Prince Duan's times of overbearing arrogance, such domineering force rival to none, didn't think that today....." Lou Sheng held mixed feelings, speaking to himself.

A hand supporting her head, Gui Wan listens on in silence, that bleak scene just now, in particularly affects one's mind and heart. Overfilling water will cause an overflow, a fuller moon will begin to wane, such principle she has always been aware of since young, all things shall never be overdone, and must refrain three points, only then can you survive. Prince Duan lost on this "full" word. Gui Wan's thoughts makes a turn, suddenly recalling, Lou Che's situation can be said to be essentially the same as Prince Duan, also extremely dangerous. Could it be, in this world, flowers really cannot bloom for hundreds of days?^[4]

Thinking a little too much, her body feels slightly weak, Gui Wan lowers her body to the side, lazily lying down, leaving her long locks to scatter, half closing her eyes, speaking to the outside of the carriage: "Lou Sheng, to the north courtyard first."

There was no response from the outside, but the carriage bursts into greatly shaky movements, once again returning to its usual speed not long after. A long while later, the carriage speed gradually slows, a wave of footsteps sounds outside the carriage, the carriage curtains is lightly raised by someone, Fiery Xi Shi's voice gently enters her ears: "Gentleman, do you have any instructions?"

Maintaining the same posture, Gui Wan appears to be in deep sleep, gently opening her mouth to say: "San Niang, what happened within the Capital these past four days?"

A tender laughter like tingling bells sounds, Fiery Xi Shi playfully says: "With such a huge matter happening, could it be that gentleman doesn't know of it?"

Gui Wan slowly opens lifts her eyelids, her eyes as tranquil as the night skies, with a smile that may or may not be hanging within it, "I appreciate further details."

A gentle breeze blows past, refreshing and pleasant.

San Niang stands before the horse carriage, narrating in detail all the movements within the Capital that have happened over the past four days, playfully saying: "That assassin died in prison, Prince Duan's hundreds of words unable to offer an explanation, but with no evidence to testify against him, originally thought that the matter will come to nothing, who knew, on the second day, it was actually the new First Ranked Scholar who stood out, presenting the incriminating evidence, setting a solid crime for Prince Duan.

"What's even more interesting is, word on the streets are saying, this new First Ranked Scholar is Prime Minister Lou's pupil, all of this may very well be Prime Minister Lou's scheme to eradicate Prince Duan. What assassin-la, incriminating evidence-la, all are Prime Minister Lou's doings.

"Now the new First Ranked Scholar has stepped up the clouds, within two days, rose up three ranks, can be said to be fair-haired one^[5] in front of the Emperor....."

Such delicately gentle words spoken in a tone of teasing as though watching a play, but Gui Wan because of the information disclosed by those words, actually feels her heart weigh down quite a bit. After San Niang leaves, the horse carriage once again gets moving, her heart like a wave-less mirror, Gui Wan once again half lays down again, with the accompanyingt rhythm of rolling wheels, she drifts into sleep.

When she had awakened, the horse carriage has already stopped outside the Prime Minister Estate, stepping off the carriage, outside the main doors of the Prime Minister Estate, there were actually a good number of people lingering around in waiting, their expressions appears anxious, occasionally whispering to one another. Gui Wan faintly smiles, playfully saying to Lou Sheng beside her: "It really is strange today, wherever we go, it is always ever so lively."

Lou Sheng dared not to rashly say anything in response, accompanying Gui Wan into the Prime Minister Estate, responding to the old housekeeper's look of surprise with a wry smile, shrugging his shoulders to express his own helplessness.

The old housekeeper was just about to step forward to ask them something, when Gui Wan's one wave of a hand cuts off his long-winded words: "Where is Lord Prime Minister?"

Lowering his head, the old housekeeper very honestly points towards the back courtyard.

The autumn air is strong in the back courtyard, stepping into the courtyard, the red maple leaves spins in the air as they scatter, the clear waves in the jade pond, curling with smoke.

Lou Che sits by the pond in pale Confucian robes, hair held up in a jade headdress, his hands holding a fishing rod, leisurely fishing in the pond, sensing someone approaching, he turns his head, the instant he sees Gui Wan, surprise flashes by his eyes, and is immediately swept away, laughing saying: "Looks like Lou Sheng is getting more and more incapable of doing his job."

Gui Wan walks up close, bending her body as she sits by Lou Che's side, steadily gazing into the pond, saying: "Many officials are requesting an audience by the doors, yet Husband is fishing here without making a single move, looks like you already have everything planned out." [6]

Thin lips hooking up a little, Lou Che smiles and says nothing, the waves in the pond meets with the wind, forming circles of rippling, yet the rod in hand makes not even the slightest of movement.

"Gui Wan, Tian Shan in the north, a vast scene of snow, as though the heavens and earth are one; Jiang Nan silk village, of elegance and graceful beauty, like rain like sorrows, which place do you like best?"

"I have not been to either, don't know how to compare."

"Shortly later, I will take you to explore the beauties of the world, how's that?"

Sounding a little laughter, she watches at the red leaves descends to the lake, leisurely sounding a light sigh: "Husband, must you lie to me as well?"

- [1] A line from the poem The Rhythm of Touring Nan Yan and Fan Kuo by Xīn Qì Jí / 辛弃疾. The specific line used here Feel that in the mortal world, everything will come to autumn, all shaken down is interpreted as: shaking down refers to the falling leaves in autumn, representing the poet's feelings after losing many important things within this life.
- [2] Please note that title of these officials from the imperial examinations actually have classier sounding titles in Chinese haha. The **Third Ranked Scholar** in the imperial examinations is actually called **tàn huā /** 探花.
- [3] The proverb for **endless flow of traffic** is **chē shuǐ mǎ long /** 车水马龙 which literally translates to **carriages like flowing water, long lines of horses like a dragon**.
- [4] Flowers cannot remain blooming for hundreds of days or huā wú bǎi rì zhī hóng / 花无百日之红 which simply means all good things comes to an end.
- [5] The **fair-haired** one is called **dà hóng rén /** 大红人 in Chinese, literally translating the great red man, as you know red can be symbolic of luck and fortune in Chinese culture and so the **dà hóng rén /** 大红人 is used to refer to someone who is **highly regarded**, **highly favoured** by someone in power.
- [6] The proverb used for having everything planned out is called chéng zhú zài xiōng / 成竹在胸 or xiōng yǒu chéng zhú / 胸有成竹 which literally translates to having a complete [image of] of bamboo embedded in one's chest (heart) before painting bamboo, the image of bamboo is already in one's heart.

...actually, had Gui Wan obediently left as Lou Che had wished, she would have saved herself from a whole load of suffering smh. It made me laugh when Gui Wan said "only this time, I will definitely not listen to you", like you ever listened to him anyway

Tensions running high, the following chapters will be the most frustrating, most aggravating to read, so you have been warned! Many negative feelings will be evoked, I'd say that De Yu gong-gong and General Lin are the only ones that I will be happy to see in the next few chapters. There's also one particular chapter that I am dreading to go through...

So you may find more frequent updates and me whizzing through translations

of the next three chapters to get all this over and done with haha

Ooh and hope everyone has/had a great mid-autumn festival!! ^__^

Full



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

In The Dark

[Flowers on] luxuriant branches easily descends one after another, [I want to] discuss with budding flowers to open little by little. [1] (All flowers bloom so brilliantly so that when time passes by they can urgently descend to the ground. If that is the case, I would like to discuss with the budding flowers, is it possible to bloom a little slower)

"It's already springtime again." The slender figure in front of the window lightly says as though sighing, Gui Wan sits leaning on the felt covered long chair (chaise lounge), gazing out into the spring air brilliantly overflowing in the courtyard, speaking out in utter boredom.

Time flies so fast, nearly half a year flashed by, how is she to not be filled with emotions, in a blink of an eye, has the "Changes of Feng Shan" already passed by for so long now?

Gui Wan takes her hand out from the snow fur, resting it on the window sill, having just come in contact with it, a heart penetrating coolness charges up her arm, slightly shrinking back, she could not refrain from inhaling the cold air, it is

still so frost cold, just like that day, by the pond when she asked Lou Che, is he lying to her as well, the feeling from that faint smile he responded with, is exactly the same. Such smile, really makes people feel the ghostly chill from within their bones.

Half a year ago, the besieging of the Prince Duan Estate failed to catch Prince Duan, as though he suddenly disappeared from the Capital. Although rumours later stated Prince Duan has appeared in the areas of Nan Jun and Luo Ling, but because there were no evidence, the matter was put to a rest. As for Lou Che, whilst many thought he wanted to tilt the power balance within the imperial court to his side alone, actually fell tremendously short from everyone's expectations as he suddenly enters a tranquil state, other than attending the court assembly every day, he practically showed no concern towards the affairs of the state.

"Exactly what is he planning to do?" The doubts within her heart is spoken out loud, Gui Wan knits her brows, thinking about the question that has been troubling her for a long time. This past half of the year, Lou Che has practically used half of his time on her, whatever can be seen, whatever can be toured, whatever can be played, he has been accompanying her in all these recreational fun, even towards Consort Ying's loss of favour, he did not even show any concern.

Lou Che becoming uncaring towards all of the state affairs, is this really him wanting to spend days like an idle cloud and wild crane?^[2] Gui Wan spouts out hot air, her pressed lips actually hooking up into a smile, as if ridiculing, as if sighing. On the surface, Lou Che is a gentle and wave-less pool, like the spring breeze brushing past, but underneath this pool, whether it is of stormy seas or rapids across the reefs, no one knows.

"If you wish to deceive another, you must first deceive yourself" this phrase, Gui Wan seems to have heard it from somewhere before, when it first drifted by her ears, she forgot all about it, thinking about it now, it is rather interesting.

The wind blows behind her, before she turns her head, Ru Qing's voice sounds: "Madam, there is a guest requesting an audience outside."

Retracting the already slightly frozen hand, Gui Wan silently sighs, him again.

This past half of the year, he has come numerous times, sometimes bringing new strange treasures, sometimes chatting around for a half a day, sometimes rushing here, with no purpose, sitting down for a moment, drinking a cup of clear tea, and leave feeling extremely satisfied.

She is finding it increasingly hard to see through him now, in her memory, he still seems to be that refreshing and frail youth, but looking at his doings this past half of the year, it seems like reality has already far left her memories.

Gui Wan strolls into the floral hall, under one glance she sees several retainers carrying a big box inside the hall, in moment of surprise, Guan Xiu Wen comes up greeting her, consistency of fortune in his official career overflowing from this youth's body, his body thus has an additional air of thriving vitality, a proud smile hangs on his lips as he calls out: "You're here." (Note of reminder: The floral hall is the Chinese equivalent of drawing room – a room aside from the main living room where guests can be received and entertained)

Sounding a shallow laughter, Gui Wan closes in, looking over the fact that he did not make any cordial addressment, her heart was put a slight discomfort. The change in this youth is caused by the influence of the environment he is in, he is still warm and friendly, but is somewhat different to the past, she is unable to specify where the difference lies, only feeling that that sense of crystal clearness has been infiltrated.

The elegant young man directs the retainers to place down the box, smiling with slight excitement, "These have been shipped in from Jiang Xi, I believe you would definitely like......" His expression like that of offering treasure appears naïve.

Upon thinking how such naivety has made all sorts of officials amongst the imperial court feel fear, Gui Wan was also extremely doubtful, is this youth really the one who cut off Prince Duan's wings within half a year, and helped the Emperor to remove several ruthless veteran officials? The rumoured brutality, and the water-like pureness before her eyes, just which one is real?

Noticing Gui Wan's heavy silence, Guan Xiu Wen also knits his brows together, asking: "What's wrong? Is there something not to your liking?"

Smiling, Gui Wan takes away her inquiring eyes, suddenly hearing a burst of

collision sound, she turns around in surprise, one box under the carelessness of a servant, has fallen to the ground, the things inside the box spills out, beads of jade glass pours out just like that, causing a noisy sound of clear ringing, an underlying halo light flows out, spilling out an entire floor of stars.

Such a valuable gift again, Gui Wan wryly smiles, really unable to understand his intentions. If it is to say him returning her grace, he has already paid it all off. But if to speak of other intentions, sometimes when he sends her gifts, as long as she says she likes it, he will be satisfied just like that, could it be that all this is just to get her to say she likes it?

"Xiu Wen....." Wanting to say some words of persuasion, but does not know where to start.

"Do you like it? This is of the high quality glass, such shine embellished with glamour, is of the highest of the highest quality goods." His eyes like clear water, Guan Xiu Wen looks at Gui Wan with such hopeful eyes, an expression as though he wants her confirmation.

Swallowing down the words she wanted to say, ".....like." If she rejects it, just like the first time round, this youth would probably completely destroy all the treasures.

Receiving a definite answer, Guan Xiu Wen finally puts his heart at ease, under Gui Wan's signal, he takes a seat at the guest spot, his eyes following Gui Wan's movement, the smile on his face unchanging.

"The imperial court is busy with state affairs, you are already a minister close by his majesty's side, how could you have the leisurely time to come here?" Not knowing what to say, she could only casually ask this.

Very lightly taking a sip of the scented tea, Guan Xiu Wen answers in a neither rushed nor impatient manner: "I have come today, to discuss matters with Teacher."

Discuss with Lou Che? What matter is this? Such suspecting question flashes by, Gui Wan laughing says: "Could it be that something big has happened within the imperial court?" Lou Che has practically entered a retreated state this past half of the year, officials who drops by has also gradually decreased, exactly what matter could there be, that requires discussing with him right now?

"Something big is indeed happening within the imperial court, his majesty wants to establish an academy, primarily above the six ministries, to share the burdens of the prime minister and six ministries." Guan Xiu Wen clearly explains the reasoning, towards Gui Wan, he has not even the slightest of wariness.

Her lips gently curls up upon hearing this, Gui Wan shows her disdain, this is clearly Zheng Liu's way to seize power, wanting to gradually overstep the power of the prime minister and the six ministries, concentrating his own imperial power, having said that, this is indeed a greatly effective approach.

"But, finding Teacher today, is not because of this matter....." Guan Xiu Wen smiles as he continues speaking.

Gui Wan looks towards him, meeting her eyes is Guan Xiu Wen's orbs like a quiet lake that appears bottomlessly deep.

Doubts secretly accumulating within her heart, Gui Wan diverts to another topic, all the topics she picks were all interesting news and stories regarding matters within the court, beating around the bush without a trace, hoping to be able to unearth some revelations. Guan Xiu Wen openly speaks without a sense of guilt, seeming to have no hesitation, but only towards the real purpose for finding Lou Che today, does he keeps his lips sealed.

The faint fragrance of tea indoors, blends in with the plum blossoms and snow scenery outside the window, the two people pleasantly chats, pretty much with joy filling the air. Speaking of the interesting news within the palace, Guan Xiu Wen mentions: "Ever since Lady Consort Yin got pregnant, within the imperial palace right now, it can be described to be in a state of extreme nervousness^[3], afraid that something similar to Consort Ying will happen." Once he finished saying this, his expression was somewhat unnatural, observing Gui Wan's face.

Seeing that the look in his eyes carries three points of attentiveness, Gui Wan feels more vigilant at heart, continuing to smile, asking: "Lady Consort Ying...... how is she?"

"Although not as doted on as before, but his majesty has not mistreated her either."

Able to pick out the pretty cynical tone in his words, Gui Wan smiles, this youth

still carries such pure naivety, his unreasonable hate towards Consort Ying, is also more or less due to feeling she has done her wrong right?

Just when the two of them were in the middle of chatting, a slender moonwhite figure slowly approaches from outside the hall, before the person enters, his voice travels in first: "Gui Wan, which esteemed guest has come by?"

Guan Xiu Wen places down the tea in hand, instantly standing up, "Teacher."

"So it is Xiu Wen ah." Sounding a pointless greeting, Lou Che's attitude is neither cold nor warm.

"Teacher, student has come today, wanting to discuss a matter with Teacher."

Seeing him directly speak in such upfront manner, Lou Che was slightly stunned, then raises a cold smile, his eyes looking Guan Xiu Wen from head to toe, seeming as though it is the first time he had met him, his speech like a light satirical laughter: "Every time I see you, it just gives me a kind of feeling as though looking at you in a different light."

Guan Xiu Wen raises his head, looking directly into Lou Che's eyes, answering with a clear resonant voice: "Thanking Teacher's praise, all has come from Teacher's cultivation of grace."

Lou Che puts on a smile, looking towards Gui Wan, his orbs appearing veiled, in the end, he does not say a word, turning around to accommodate to Guan Xiu Wen, the two of them heading into the study room to discuss matters, the floral hall is suddenly left a hall of coldness.

Gui Wan sits in her original spot, picking up the tea, the tea is already cold, the fragrant already gone, taking a sip without minding this, she places down the tea cup, coldly sighing out loud: "Clearly is a cup of tea, once cooled down the taste is actually different, it really is a few points similar to that of people......" Turning her head as she smiles and ask Ru Qing who had been standing by the side all this time, "Don't you think so?"

Ru Qing was stunned at first, and then nods her head, heavily responding with a sound of: "Yes, Madam." Giving rise to a wave of lightly laughter from Gui Wan.

.....

Like the first snow, prideful plum blossoms, the breeze during spring carries a fragrance.

Plum blossom fragrance faintly leaks into the hall through the window, seemingly lingering with worries. Gui Wan silently observes the scenery outside the window, time sneaks away within such silence. Two whole hours have passed by, even Ru Qing was growing impatient, wondering to herself: exactly what matter is Lord Prime Minister and First Ranked Scholar Guan discussing, to actually take up so much time?

The time of waiting, seems to be passing even slower.

Fire, within her chest there seems to be a small ball fire burning, disturbing Gui Wan's thoughts. Mind temporarily blank, temporarily chaotic, she was practically unclear of what she herself was thinking about, but the scenes before her eyes were flying around and around, deep down she could not help but wonder, the situation of leisurely and carefree mood this past half of the year, was it a dream or was it real? Right now within the study room, are they discussing power of profit?

The sheer cunningness and falsehood within this Capital City, the intrigues within the imperial palace, is it of power, or is it of status bewitchment?

Making a sudden turn of the head, entering her eyes were Ru Qing's face of impatience, Gui Wan just silently smiles, her heart calming down a few points. Wait, only waiting.....what she is waiting for is perhaps not the result, but the start of a new round.

Finally spotting Lou Che, Guan Xiu Wen's figures, the two people slowly making their way over, both faces carrying a smile, unable to distinguish whether it is real or fake, gradually closing in.

Only just stepping into the hall, Lou Che speaks with an additional apologetic tone within his usual gentle one: "Gui Wan, I need to enter the palace this once today, looks like, accompanying you to tour the mushroom garden will have to be postponed."

Her heart receives a slight surprise, Gui Wan's face was unchanging as she nods her head, although between them, there were actually no arrangements to go touring whatever this mushroom garden is.

Guan Xiu Wen chimes in from the side: "Teacher, there is not much time, let us quickly enter the palace."

Lou Che walks upfront, lightly hugging Gui Wan, his body temperature lightly transmitted onto Gui Wan, lowering his head onto Gui Wan's neck area, lightly speaking as though he's a mosquito, he whispers into her ear: "I'm sorry, Gui Wan, wait for my return." His voice can only be heard by the two of them, his expression hidden, not one person could see it.

Heart turning cold, with the feeling of gradually sinking, the fine tone of this light voice was actually heavier than a thousand $\sin^{[4]}$, pressing down on Gui Wan to the point where she did not even know how to breath for a moment, lightly gritting her teeth, Gui Wan says: "This is the decision you made?" ($J\bar{l}n / f\bar{l}$ – a weight measurement, approximately twelve kilograms)

"No, this is the decision the heavens made." Letting go of the person in his arms, Lou Che smiles as he speaks this, the melancholy just now seeming like a dream, turning around to head off, Guan Xiu Wen bows in signal of his leave, and then follows after.

Gui Wan coldly observes their back figures, watching them blend into the snowy scene, Lou Che actually did not turn his head back again, leaving without a look back. Her vision blurs, within her eyes only the vast whiteness and brilliant dots of red remains. The brewing tears in her eyes, were warm, were sour, also pinned with a little sadness. Opening her eyes wide, in the end, the tears did not fall.

Up until it was deep into evening hours, Lou Che had still not returned. Gui Wan felt her body grow increasingly cold the longer she sat, finally unable to withstand it, she stands up, ordering Ru Qing, Ru Ming who were serving by the sides: "Go prepare our belongings, we're leaving this place."

The two maids found it rather incomprehensible, but did not ask anything, immediately acting upon the orders. Having only just walked out of the hall, the old housekeeper was already running in from the courtyard in panic. The old housekeeper usually the most calm when carrying out tasks, when has he ever appeared so anxious? Gui Wan upon seeing the situation, face immediately pales. At this moment, that hoarse aged voice of panic travels in from outside:

"Ma-.....Madam, something bad has happened......

The two maids were stunned by the old housekeeper's panic, standing within the courtyard, not knowing whether to enter or withdraw, receiving Gui Wan's signal, they once again return inside the hall, the old housekeeper desperately pants, face suddenly turning pale, suddenly turning red, forcefully blurting out: "Madam, something bad-.....something bad has happened, there's.....there's imperial troops besieging the Prime Minister Estate. I heard Lord Prime Minister has ran into trouble within the palace....."

The retainers and maids within the hall also look at one another upon hearing this, panic showing, this Prime Minister Estate is the most prestigious official residence within the Capital, one shock at the Prime Minister Estate, and the entire Capital shall be shaken, the usual amount of officials visiting has already gradually decreased, didn't think that today they would actually encounter such a situation, how could those within the Prime Minister Estate not be panic stricken?

Clearly knowing that Lou Che's trip into the palace today will definitely be a tricky one, but she did not expect that the resulting disaster would actually hit them this fast, there is simply no time to react to such change. Gui Wan carefully looks around from the corner of her eyes, taking in everyone's panicking state, although anxious deep down, her face has already kept all emotions in control, enforcing calmness, staring into the courtyard where darkness has concentrated.

Affected by her composure, the panicking state within the hall also fades, the situation inside the hall and outside in the courtyard sinks into stillness with not a single sound, in this darkness, first there was one, and then many more dots of lights, slowly flooding into the courtyard like a tidal wave, a moment later, the imperial troops' fire lights up the entire courtyard, bright like that of daylight. Lin Rui En stands in centre, by the sides there stands a person in casual grey robes, neither dark nor light, it was actually the one who acted like as a double agent, the palace's head eunuch, Li gong-gong.

The two people comes up to the open hall, watching Gui Wan leisurely sit there, seemingly smiling as she suspiciously watches the imperial troops within the courtyard. Li gong-gong first steps forward, his shrill voice drawing out people's annoyance: "Madam Lou, coming to the Prime Minister Estate today under imperial orders, Prime Minister Lou has took Consort Ying away as they secretly fled the back palace, right now are they or are they not staying within the estate, please invite them out to speak."

A fine finger gentle stroking across her lower cheek area, Gui Wan slightly knits her brows, the moment she heard of the news, her heart seems to have been pricked by invisible needles, pain flooding out, sourly finding it difficult to suppress. Recalling what the Empress has once said, Lou Che sure enough could not throw aside his inner concerns, and left her to sink into a dilemma, heart lighting up in fire, despite being angry to the extreme, she instead smiles, a melodic voice sounding: "Li gong-gong is so socially active and resourceful^[5], indeed far above the typical, don't know what residential rank gong-gong is right now?"

Li gong-gong was stunned at first, watching this Madam Lou's idle attitude, he was secretly amazed deep down in his heart, answering: "Entering the palace at the age of eight, now having the head eunuch of the inner palace, residential rank five." His tone arrogant, quite a show of immense proudness.

Gui Wan takes a look at him, sneering: "Rank five? A merely rank five wants to pin a sin onto the current court's prime minister? Could it be that gong-gong does not understand the laws of the land, only those from the third rank and above can condemn the senior officials outside of court, not to mention you reside within the inner palace, since when can you interfere with the affairs of the state?"

One round of reprimanding, with reasons, with evidence, Li gong-gong was instantly stunned speechless, not knowing how he is to react. Usually assuming dominant air within the palace, he has not yet thought that, today, amongst the gathering of a big crowd, he would actually be taunted beyond endurance by a seeming tenderly frail woman, under the shinning firelights, his face was both pale and thundering, hatred planted within his heart.

Lin Rui En sees that the situation does not seem right, and could only intercept: "May Madam not feel offended, towards today's matter, his majesty only wants to figure out what happened. If you were in any way offended, please

show a little forgiveness." Using the firelight to look towards the woman on the chair, in the end his heart just cannot bear it, tone spoken with such sincerity.

Gui Wan looks into Lin Rui En's water-clear orbs, her heart gently flutters, slightly calming her anger, taking a glimpse of that awkward expression of Li gong-gong, she knows that her doings just now has already angered this eunuch, which would definitely lead to following disasters in future, keeping note to herself, if there is a chance, she must first get rid of him. Her fired up anger has already been drained, emotions has also calmed down a lot, guessing from the situation in which they came in, Lou Che entered the palace and took away Consort Ying......within the back palace, how did he possibly take away a consort under everyone's watchful eyes? Thinking about it from another point, she recalls the secret door in Yu Gan Hall, could it be that Lou Che also knows of this secret passage?

Thinking up to here, Gui Wan seriously speaks: "My husband entered the palace yet to return, I have not even inquired the palace about him, how is it that you contrarily come to the Prime Minister Estate in search?"

Today's set game has clearly been planned by Zheng Liu. Half a year ago, maliciously framing Prince Duan, in such sudden lightning speed manner, ridding him off his potential power, originally wanted to take the opportunity to strike down Lou Che, regrettable that Lou Che never allows a single drip to leak by him, he could not possibly relentlessly strike him. Whilst concentrating his imperial power, in the situation of wanting to establish the inner and outer court, Lou Che has undoubtedly become an obstacle again, that is why, right now he can only follow the same plan, frame Lou Che. Consort Ying, this major pawn, really is of great use ah......

Her heart coils around this issue, emotions rolls within Gui Wan's chest, a bitter and sour feeling overflows her heart, unable to hold it back, the tears overfills and thus drops, only one drip, and she reaches up to cover her cheek, covering the tear, within a blink of an eye, her expression once again returns to its usual state. Within the hall, everyone's hearts were in a nerve wreaking state, not one person noticed, only Lin Rui En's attentive eyes were locked onto her, his heart trembles, brows knitted, body standing still, unmoving.

Looking at everyone outside the hall, Gui Wan composes herself, Lou Che was

not held back in the palace today, Consort Ying has also disappeared, this scandal, with no basis, no evidence, the Emperor also cannot possibly announce the news to others, let alone convict them, everything can only be dealt with secretly, this is the only turning point within the whole matter!

The hall suddenly falls into silence, other than the burning sound of fire, not one person dared to speak up, Li gong-gong's face turns cold, seeing the atmosphere stiffen, without hesitation, he turns his eyes, glancing over towards Lin Rui En, but actually finds him staring intently at Madam Lou, revealing an expression of slight concern, secretly scoffing at him deep inside: what cold general? In face of beauty, half of his soul has already been ditched. Clearing his throat, he speaks up: "Madam Lou, the matter happened so suddenly, his majesty also only wants to figure out the situation, with no meaning to convict a crime, getting to the bottom of things, it this not what everyone hopes for?"

"Gong-gong's words are extremely right, but, if no crime has been convicted, the imperial troops entering the Prime Minister Estate, what is this all about then?"

"This is but only a regular course of official duties, I have received imperial orders to take charge, wanting to invite Prime Minister Lou back into the palace to clarify the facts, Madam Lou, please will you forgive me." Having said that, he sends a few eye signals towards the imperial troops besides him, the imperial troops immediately disperses, a few of them charges into the living room, the others dispersed into different areas of the Prime Minister Estate, actually searching around the place.

Listening to him personally speak of imperial orders, she knows he's a wolf assuming the tiger's dominance, Gui Wan coldly watches on, watching them search, after observing for a while, she feels that the matter does not seem to be an act, could it be that right now, Lou Che has really disappeared along with Consort Ying? Her heart is met with a burst of irritation. The imperial troops very quickly returns to the courtyard, the results they have come for has not been found, Li gong-gong's expression also turns a little green.

Looking at him with slight disdain, Gui Wan lightly laughs, "Li gong-gong, right now I should be the one asking, where is husband, right? Receiving no news after entering the palace, could it be, this imperial palace can also consume people?"

Li gong-gong does not speak, his face growing increasingly gloomy, Lin Rui En's solemn voice travels into her ears, "Madam, Prime Minister Lou entering the palace is not false, but right now, he is already no longer in the palace, this is also an undeniable fact."

Looking at him seriously, Gui Wan does not speak, Li Yu's words, she does not believe more than half of it, but with Lin Rui En speaking up, she cannot not consider the authenticity of this situation.

"General Lin, exactly who was it that saw my husband and Lady Consort Ying....." The following words were stuck in her throat, Gui Wan hides her anger.

The orbs that were pinned onto her reveals a shallow light of tenderness, Lin Rui En smiles in consolation: "Madam mustn't be anxious, this matter was seen by Lord Shou and two maids within Jing Ye. As for what exactly the truth is, right now, we are still unable to reach a conclusion."

Lightly nodding her head, Gui Wan hooks up a smile in appreciation, this general who just always carries three points of coldness, has given her a type of inexplicable sense of security, even across half the hall, standing opposite one another, she still trusts him.

Li gong-gong looks towards Lin Rui En in blame, thinking to himself, how could he come clean like that; turning his head, he says to Gui Wan: "Madam Lou, now that the matter can be said to be unclear, yet we have accepted imperial orders, returning just like this would be difficult to explain, his majesty has said prior to departure, if Prime Minister Lou cannot be found, then we shall wait, if Prime Minister Lou is to not show up for one day, then we shall wait a day, if this brings along inconveniences to Madam's daily life......"

"Li gong-gong means to leave behind imperial troops within the Prime Minister Estate to monitor me?"

Shadily sounding a laugh, Li gong-gong laughingly says: "If Madam wants to think that way, then there is nothing that can be done, I too am helpless ah."

Tightly pressing her lips together, Gui Wan's sitting body has already turned completely ice-cold, the power struggle today, she practically has no escape route, could it be that she really has to be kept under house arrest, waiting until the very moment Lou Che shows up? The skies seems to have gotten colder, her

entire body turning numb.

Everyone within the Prime Minister Estate all reveals a look of anxiety, the situation is pressing, the Prime Minister Estate right now has no military power, there is no one that can help them, and can only be trampled on by others. The situation once again falls into freezing point, fixed in deadlock.

Outside in the courtyard, a tall and slim figure approaches, jogging along the way to the hall's doors, walking up to Li gong-gong's side, whispering something into his ears.

Lin Rui En walks closer into the living room, walking up to ten steps away from Gui Wan: "Madam, her highness the Empress has just laid down a decree, inviting you to stay in the palace for a few days to accompany her."

Li gong-gong says from the side: "Madam truly is blessed with good fortune, to even receive her highness the Empress' loving grace right now."

Upon hearing this, Gui Wan was neither worried nor joyful, leisurely calm to the point where she practically showed no expression, carefully thinking about it for a while, up until that Li gong-gong had already revealed an impatient look, and only then did she gradually stand up, slowly stepping into the centre of the living room, a shallow smile as she replies: "That being the case, I shall stay in the palace for a few days then."

Lin Rui En makes a little nod of his head, stepping away three steps, he takes a good look at Gui Wan face of fatigue, wanting to speak up, but in the end he does not say anything, turning around towards the courtyard, he orders for half of the imperial troops to stay guarding the Prime Minister Estate, the other half to return to the palace.

Gui Wan silently watches, purposely making a sudden glance at that Li gonggong's deep and shady eyes, beckoning her hand to call for Ru Qing, Ru Ming too make preparations. Within the hectic scene, she quietly organises her mood, this really is a last resort decision, rather than being trapped within the Prime Minister Estate, every step difficult to make, it is much better to go into the palace. First of all, the most dangerous place is also the most safest place, not to mention that she had already laid down some handiwork within the palace, half a year of resting and reorganisation has already given her a little bit of

dependence; second of all, she really wants to know the truth behind this matter, and is also very curious at the same time, does the truth lie within the palace?

"Madam," Lin Rui En walks up to Gui Wan's side breaking off her endless streams of wistful thinking, lightly saying in a quiet tone, "A horse carriage has already been prepared outside, you can leave now."

Regaining her composure, Gui Wan sweetly reveals a smile, "General, thank you." Her eyelids half-down completely obscuring those deep, unfathomable thoughts, also overlooking the cold general's moment of absence.

Li gong-gong breathes in and out the cold air, whilst taking the lead. General Lin and Gui Wan slowly walks out of the hall, stepping onto the path of the plum woods, within the darkness, even the plum blossoms loses its colours, the emptiness leaving only the clear fragrance that soaks into the depths of one's heart, other than the dots of firelight, the entire universe seems to have sunken into the darkness, Lin Rui En suddenly lowers his body, Gui Wan stops in her steps, watching him gradually raise his body again, picking up an embroidered handkerchief from the ground, passing it to her.

From the snow fur coat, she extends her hand in acceptance, Gui Wan is filled with warmth, she can be described as one who will lose her power right now, yet this solemnly cold looking general is still able to bend down to pick up the handkerchief for her, in this moment of a full display of human coldness and warmth, such action is so valuable, it feels somewhat unreal. The dark skies enchanted by firelights in the dark night, the scattered lights floats across her heart, Gui Wan sighs.



"Madam, are you able to trust me?" Are the sweet fragrance of the plum blossoms able to whisk people off into intoxication? Why is he able to ask this question so easily?

"Perhaps I trust General more than anyone else right now." He is trustable right? Time after time, he has saved her in moments of danger, the firm strength that embraced her as they fell into the valley together, the cold clear figure that stood within the rain, within the darkness filled with plum blossom fragrance, the floating shadow that bent down to pick up a handkerchief for her, can she rely on him in times of danger?

"May Madam trust in me, I vow, to guard you safe and sound." It must be the plum blossom confusing people's heart, to make him spit out such words, the outlines of that resolute ice-cold face appears to have softened, clearing up within the darkness.

Footsteps faltering, Gui Wan looks back in astonishment, wanting to get a clear look of something, but the darkness covered up half of it, the sight before her is somewhat hazy; wanting to ask, but at a spot not far away, Li gong-gong's impatient voice of urging sounds, sharply cutting through the quiet air.

General Lin strides forward, speaking in reminder: "Madam, the skies are already cold and dark, let us quickly go."

Gui Wan follows after behind, heading towards those dots of firelights, absently, what the road ahead is like, she is not sure.

In this cold like water night, she sits amongst the tall red tiled carriage walls, stuffed with the splendid of gold and jade, such dreamlike enchantment shadows, instantly wrapping around her.

- [1] The last two lines from the poem Walking Along The Riverbank Alone Enjoying The Flowers by Dù Fǔ / 杜甫.
- [2] To live life like an **idle cloud, wild crane** or **xián yún yě hè** / 闲云野鹤 means **to live a recluse and unconstrained life.**
- [3] State of extreme nervousness is described as cǎo mù jiē bīng / 草木皆兵 which literally translates to [even] grass and wood are all like soldiers, meaning

everything is on high alert.

[4] To be socially active and resourceful is actually referred to as cháng xiù shàn wǔ /长袖善舞 which literally translates to long sleeves are an advantage in a dance.

With everything going on in these recent chapters and chapters to follow, I think I may just hide away from the comments section for now, so don't be surprised if I don't reply to comments. No matter how angered and how annoyed you may be in these chapters, I will still be reading the comments so ahem be mindful of language please, joke joke, just feel free to let all the frustration out, let it all out...but before that, can we just share words of praises and blow some kisses to our dearest general, he's the only keeping me going right now, such a solemn manly man like himself, bending down to pick up a lady's handkerchief, that "Madam, are you able to trust me?" (\P _ \P) and Gui Wan speaking our minds there. Yes! You're the only we trust general!!!

Full



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Imprisoned Moon

Strolling around the palace, she often gets this feeling, as though all things that can be described with the word "magnificence" has all gathered here. Of grace, great elegance, air of royalty, every little grass and tree overflows with remarkability. Fiddling with the flowers whilst walking and stopping around, Gui Wan strolls through the imperial garden, three days in the palace, yet she feels as though she spent three years here, calm on the surface, but actually long sunken into loneliness inside.

These three days, there was not the slightest news of Lou Che, and within the palace, a blockade seems to have been conducted regarding such news, no one knows that the once doted Lady Consort Ying has already disappeared. What's more laughable is, word from the imperial court has spread, rumours of Prime

Minister Lou returning to his hometown for some time. Her steps coming to a stop, Gui Wan looks into the distance, her eyes regrettably catching onto the red walls, completely cut off from the outside world, her eyes turns towards another spot, abruptly finding, the red walls are everywhere, running endlessly with no gaps.

"Madam, is your body not well?" De Yu follows by her side, seeing Gui Wan stand there motionless, he worriedly asks.

"No," Once again raising her foot, Gui Wan walks onto the tree lined path, asking without turning her head, "Is there still no news?"

"No. May Madam relax a little, no news right now is also good news, Prime Minister Lou has a solid foundation, almost half of the imperial court shares closely related power relations with Prime Minister Lou, not to mention Prime Minister Lou is also on friendly terms with each military governors, even if his majesty holds most power within the Capital, he cannot do anything with Prime Minister Lou." His gentle voice persuading her, each sentence making fair points.

"Prime Minister Lou is on friendly terms with military governors?" Gui Wan was surprised, this is the first time she heard of this, entering deep thoughts, she says in a refreshingly direct manner: "De Yu gong-gong, may I trouble you with a matter, no need to search within the Capital, care to pass on a message to San Niang, full efforts on investigating for any news in Nan Jun and Luo Ling."

Nan Jun and Luo Ling? De Yu freezes, these are the two biggest states in the southern area, there were once rumours of Prince Duan fleeing to that area, but the Emperor fears the powers of the military governors, and dares not to make a move, does this have any relations with Prime Minister Lou? Carefully thinking about it, he seems to have thought of something, raising his head, he finds that Gui Wan had wandered far off, hurriedly following after her, he lowers his head saying: "Madam, then I shall go carry out the tasks now, but Madam....."

"I'll be continuing to stroll around for a while, you go ahead first."

De Yu bows, slowly withdrawing away, in the eyes of outsiders, there is nothing strange about this sight, no one is aware that the deputy head eunuch who is currently on the rise in power within this palace actually stands on Madam Lou's side of the political stance.

With no one following along by her side, her surroundings immediately felt more deserted, Gui Wan wanders aimlessly, not wanting to returning to the Empress' Palace. The Empress' aid this time more or less carries the flavour of a debt of gratitude, if matters between two sisters are to be calculated through debt of gratitude, then that would be rather dull and pointless. Lightly sounding a sigh, she turns her head to actually find herself arriving at "Cheng Kun Palace", a faint smile floating to the surface of her face, Gui Wan steps inside.

Walking into the inner chamber, she sees the little prince being surrounded by a few palace maids and eunuchs, once that child sees Gui Wan, a joyful smile spreads, spreading out his little arms, calling out: "Aunt Wan, Aunt Wan." The palace maids and eunuchs sees the situation and all withdraws aside.

Taking a few steps closer, the little prince had already fluttered over, one grab seizing hold of Gui Wan's skirt, with bright rosy red cheeks, clear and moist big eyes, particularly drawing out people's tender love. Gui Wan waves off everyone around them, until no one else were in the room with them, only then did she reach out and lift up the prince, lightly giving his cheek a little peck, a smile faintly spilling out.

This child is the current Emperor's only prince, the Empress' biological son. The original laws of imperial court has specified, once a prince is born, he must be separated from his mother, and every day, only two hours can be spent visiting the prince, due to missing her son, who knows how many tears the Empress has spilled. This child's innocence is in full bloom, likeable to others, what's even more predestined is, since the very first time he saw Gui Wan, he just loved to stick to her, Gui Wan laughingly sighs, could it be that this thing called "blood ties" truly be as miraculous as such?

After frolicking around with the little prince for a while, playing games that children plays, he suddenly speaks up: "Aunt Wan, are you not happy?" This less than four years old child, actually has unexpectedly good observation skills.

Gui Wan places him down, stroking his hair, she smiles as she says: "That's right ah, there are far too many troubling matters." Towards other people, she would definitely never blurt out how troubled she feels, but facing this child who does not understand worldly matters, who also has no one by his side, she can completely believe that there is no need to be vigilant.

His little head tilting to the side, putting on a thoughtful expression on his face, eyelashes fluttering down and up like a fan, acting like an adult entering deep thoughts, prompting Gui Wan to be unable to hold herself back, laughing out loud, but the little prince's following words actually completely cut off her lively laughter: "Aunt Wan do not be troubled, wait till I become Emperor.....and I shall let Aunt Wan be wholeheartedly happy."

Completely thunderstruck as she looks at the child before her, Gui Wan was speechless, only after a long while did she slowly speak up and gently ask: "Who was it that told you this?" Clearly a child yet to reach the tender age of four years old, how could he possibly be able to say such shocking words? Could it be that the imperial palace truly is as horrifying as such, even a child who has yet to learn to run is able to be contaminated? Once she thinks about how this child will also be stepping into officialdom in future, everyone trying to outwit one another, wave after wave of biting chills hits her deep down in her heart, the hand stoking his head slowly withdraws.

"It was Mother Empress who said it. In future, I will be Emperor." Childlike speech with childlike words, within such adorable speaking tone there actually harbours future intentions.

It was the Empress? Afraid that because of Consort Yin's pregnancy, she feels threatened, and only because of this would she speak of such matters with a child right? Gui Wan remains silent, watching the little prince bouncily expressing the Empress' words with phrases that he is not yet familiar with, "Mother Empress said, I can do whatever I want to do.....hei-hei......Aunt Wan?"

"It is not like that. The imperial throne is a mountain of blades, a sea of flames, how is it that easy?" Knitting her brows together, Gui Wan pulls a serious face as she lightly persuades, just that the child is just too young, he does not understand her words, continuing to smile joyfully.

Thoughts taking a turn, Gui Wan extends her hand, harshly pinching onto the prince's cheek, paining him to the point that his child's cry directly calls out, tears brewing up in his eyes, looking at Gui Wan in shock, tearfully calling out: "Hurt......wu-....."

"Becoming the Emperor, this is what it's like, but you cannot even say it hurts,

you still want to be it?" Switching to a method that he will understand, Gui Wan tirelessly, earnestly, teaches him. How much she hopes to erase the deep imprint the Empress has carved into his little heart.

Unable to refrain from whimpering out loud, the Prince became like a rattle drum, "Wu-.....I don't want to anymore......" Shaking his head side to side, with every drawing in of a breath, every weep, looking absolutely pitiful, suddenly seeing something, his mouth opens wide, the sound of his cries swallowed back into his stomach, simmering there as he dares not to move, seeming just like he has seen something terrifying.

Gui Wan immediately turns her head back, Zheng Liu is standing by the doors, a face of thoughtfulness as he stares at her and the prince, those orbs appears deep and still, a bottomless pit. Gui Wan's heart crazily beats, soundlessly showing up like that, who knows how long he was stood there, how much he has heard?

The silent atmosphere continued on for a while, right at the moment Gui Wan hurriedly recovers her composure, when bowing in greeting, she glances at Zheng Liu, his face carries a slightly smile, filled with an air of Confucianism, the still and deep look in his orbs from just now disappears without a trace. Leisurely approaching them, brushing past Gui Wan's body, his eyes set straight ahead, walking directly in front of the little prince, his big hand gently stroking the prince's little head, tenderly saying: "What's wrong, do you not recognise Father Emperor now?"

Because of sensing pain just now, the half hanging tears on his cheek trembles in movement, and his lips presses together, the little prince quietly says: "Father Emperor....." Within his baby-like voice and baby-like speech, there carries a seemingly aggrieved ambiguity.

"Such an intelligent child." Zheng Liu raises his brows as he praises, retrieving his hand, his eyes sweeps around the room, finally settling on Gui Wan, "Madam Lou, long time no see."

Every time she hears this type of speaking tone of his that sits in between being playful and being serious, Gui Wan feels a slight sense of conflict within her heart, containing a smile as she says: "Troubled your majesty with such lingering thoughts."

"Are you still this calm till this day? Looks like Madam is also a heartless person." Zheng Liu lowly laughs, the little prince is evidently shrinking back, yet he does not think of him as disobedient, "Prime Minister Lou's whereabouts are unknown, Madam is taking it easy, exactly is it the heart that holds no longing, or is it being wise to protect yourself from troubles?

"Your majesty is speaking too heavily, did Husband not return to his hometown? Where has the words 'whereabouts unknown' come from?" Taking out the smokescreen that he had released to counter-block his questions.

Zheng Liu deep orbs stares into Gui Wan for a while, before heartily laughing out loud, "What a great mouth of eloquence....." Just when such words were being spoken, the palace maids and eunuchs outside the doors returns to the room upon hearing the sound of speaking, seeing the Emperor they were all rendered shock, kneeling down on the ground in a uniformed manner.

Gui Wan secretly sighs in relief, watching as the palace maids hurries to take care of the Prince, taking the opportunity in wanting to withdraw out of the hall, she was just about to bow in signal of her leave, when Zheng Liu suddenly speaks up: "Madam Lou, it is rare of you to have a short stay within the palace, I am missing the friendship shared between monarch and subject with Prime Minister Lou, why not allow me to provide great hospitality for Madam this once?"

"Your majesty is of a supremely honourable position, how could I trouble your majesty?" This demonic Emperor of deeply unfathomable thoughts, joy and anger indistinguishable, who knows what exactly he is plotting.

"Is Madam rejecting my good intentions?" Slowly taking a step out, Zheng Liu raises his voice, seeming to be rather displeased.

From her peripheral vision, Gui Wan notices that the few palace maids within the room have already turned their heads over, strangely looking over at her, knowing deep inside that if she continues to reject him it will attract criticisms, she braces herself, with the posture of a weak and fragile willow, she replies, "Gui Wan dares not, thanking your majesty's magnificent grace."

Expecting her to answer like such all along, Zheng Liu does not even turn his head back as he leaves the palace halls. Gui Wan takes a few steps forwards,

from her ears she hears the little prince gently calling out Aunt Wan, carrying an apologetic look she glances back at him, hundreds of different feelings mixing together within her heart, in the end she turns her head, following Zheng Liu's figure in leaving.

Outside the courtyard there is only Zheng Liu alone standing there, beside him not a single person is following by his side, Gui Wan slowly paces up to him, more or less with feelings of reluctance, her heart filled with unwillingness. Just that Zheng Liu just had to be standing sideways, without any care at all, his eyes looking into the distant, his eyes blurring into a leisurely faint colour, a look full of deep thinking, Gui Wan accompanies him, standing by his side, quietly estimating him, but does not say anything to interrupt him.

"Madam," Zheng Liu suddenly turns his head, directly meeting Gui Wan's eyes, the corner of his lips forming a slight curve, "Can you guess, where Prime Minister Lou is right now?"

Gui Wan receives a slight shock from his sudden turn of his head, under inferior precautions, she deeply looks into the deep and quiet area between his brows, seeing his eyes slightly flash, his mind seeming unsettled, busily shifting his eyes, his line of sight slightly turning away, she casts her eyes to the scenery behind Zheng Liu's figure, "Your majesty, I am unable to answer this question."

"Minister Lou truly is ruthless ah," Before Zheng Liu's figure made a move, the wind blows against his sleeves making it float up, even the hidden air of untamed nature on his body raised up three points in the wind, "In the crucial moment, to actually leave you behind also, I really cannot not admire him."

Towards Lou Che's destination point, she seems to have practically already gotten a vague idea, Gui Wan feels a chilly air flood into her heart, yet her mouth frankly replies: "Your majesty is worrying too much."

Carefully looking over Gui Wan, deep down Zheng Liu could not refrain from being secretly surprised, thinking of her pinching the little prince's cheek just before, asking that question "Becoming the Emperor, this is what it's like, but you cannot even say it hurts, you still want to be it?" His heart throbs, the coldness in his eyes secretly gathers up, a stern look passes by his face, and he turns around, walking ahead.

Failing to understand, Gui Wan can only helplessly follow after him, walking along the meandering gravel pathway, the air still carries a chill, under hastiness, inhaling it into the mouth, the frosty chill is like knives, she holds onto the snow fur collar, wrapping it tighter, secretly complaining about this Son of Heaven's eccentric temperament.

Accompanying Zheng Liu strolling around the garden, in which not a single word was spoken along the way, only silently walking. This garden is originally a place of few people, thus they were met with no disruption, up until they came up to a pavilion, did Zheng Liu finally come to a stop. Gui Wan carefully looks all around, turns out it is the garden beside Chong Hua Hall, recalling the scenes that played out within this hall, her mood also feels conflicted, noticing that Zheng Liu is suddenly inside the pavilion, sitting on the stone bench, leaning back on the stone pillar, and actually have his eyes closed in resting, she was absolutely speechless, Gui Wan steps into the pavilion, not knowing whether she should speak up or not, deep down she was secretly annoyed, not knowing whether this is the Son of Heaven's intent to purposely put her in a difficult position.

"Your majesty....." Lightly calling out, yet he actually did not show the slightest response, Gui Wan walks closer, raising her voice a little, "Your majesty....."

Zheng Liu continues to lean against the pillar with his eyes closed, turning a deaf ear, Gui Wan also could not do anything about it, even if she continues calling out to him, he would still ignore her, she could only sit on another stone bench by the stone table, enduring the chilly spring air as she waits. Fortunately, it is a flourishing time of newly sprung flowers, the wind brushing against her face carries a very faint fragrance of sweetness, just sitting here in company, for a long time, they spent their time each enjoying their own entertainment.

Not knowing how much time has passed by, from afar one can see a purple shadow approaching, upon closer inspection, it is Li gong-gong, that face that usually appears very detestable to her, right now, because he is the solution to her dilemma, Gui Wan actually feels delighted, faintly smiling as she waits for him to jog up to the pavilion.

Li gong-gong upon seeing Gui Wan here, was slightly stunned, his face not looking happy, and also appears a little complex: "Your majesty.....your

majesty....."

Slowly opening his eyes, Zheng Liu appears to be high spirits, opening his mouth in asking: "What's the matter?"

"Your majesty, Minister of Punishments, Minister of Personnel, Minister of Labour, these several senior officials are waiting to be summoned outside Yu Shu Hall, stating that there are urgent matters to address."

"Oh?" Zheng Liu seems a little interested, "What do these old ministers want to do now?"

Raising his head, Li gong-gong's eyes were signalling that there is an outsider present, thus making it inconvenient to answer, but actually sees Zheng Liu smiling with hidden intentions, illustrating his approval, greatly startled, he rapidly glances over Gui Wan, once again bowing his head, "They are objecting your majesty's establishing of the central academy, specially coming here to put forward their advices."

Standing up, Zheng Liu straightens out his clothing, turning his head to the side, he smiles in asking: "Madam, say, should I or should I not go see them?"

Originally thinking she could get away whilst they discuss matters, who would have known that she would actually be questioned by Zheng Liu regarding such matters, the establishing of this academy holds the motives of him gathering his imperial power, the senior officials of the imperial court's unwillingness is also reasonable, in discretion, she replies saying: "Your majesty, haste does not bring success."

Eyes darkening, Zheng Liu gathers up his chilly air, staring at Gui Wan for a while, the comfortable smile leaving his face.

Being tormented for a half the day, both of Gui Wan's legs had gone a little numb, watching Zheng Liu and Li gong-gong leave from afar, a few words still drifts towards her within the wind, Li gong-gong sows discord, discrediting her own words. But Gui Wan was not angered, deep inside she was considering, a strategy to get rid of this Li gong-gong. Thinking for a long time, she already has everything planned out^[1], standing up to return to the palace.

Originally thinking that this little episode was just a whimsical move of the

Emperor's, and will naturally pass away after going through it, who would have known that all of this is but only the start of her suffering. Up to this point after a few days, the Emperor actually graces the Empress' Palace Hall, wanting her to accompany them on the same table without exception, not that they did anything in particular, only chatting, enjoying tea, playing the zither, reciting poetry, drinking wine, painting, everything done on the whim, randomly without plan.

Following that, the Emperor got more and more quieter by the day, yet she felt more and more flustered by the day, her heart hung high up, coping with his occasional aesthetic mood, towards his intentions, she became increasingly confused, unable to find the relevance.

"Madam Lou," A palace maid walks up to the inner chamber, reporting, "The imperial sedan has arrived, may Madam go to the outer courtyard in accompaniment to enjoy the flowers."

Again? Gui Wan puts aside the book, her face showing a look of resentment, leisurely getting up, she follows the palace maid and heads outside, her heart muttering her complains, what exactly does he want to do now?

With the palace maid she walks out of the hall, at the end of the corridor they run into the Empress, Gui Wan slows down her pace, the Empress that has always been carrying a cosy smile these past few days, held a face of no emotions right now, the moment their eyes met, she diverts her eyes away, lips slightly parts but closes again, pausing with hesitance, but in the end no words comes out of her mouth, her gracefulness tenses up and relaxes again as she flutters past.

Such silent stuffiness hits Gui Wan with deep feelings more so than that of speaking out loud, sounding a lamenting sigh. Walking along the corridors, turning a corner of the corridor, before she had even stepped into the garden, Li gong-gong's voice already reaches her ears: "Your majesty, the plans of the central academy has come down to nothing......this Lou Che is indeed abominable......" Once half of his words were spoken, he sees the palace maid and Gui Wan's figures, he immediately shuts his mouth, standing to one side.

Gui Wan gazes over, Zheng Liu sits in the garden, golden robes and

embroidered belt, a hand supporting his jaw, pouring for himself as he drinks, looking pleasant and content. A few days of close communication, she is fully aware this person's sense of joy and anger cannot possibly be detected with common sense, Li gong-gong's words just now still lingering the ear, her mind tightens up her awareness level, stepping into the garden, smiling, she bows in greeting, "May our Emperor live and reign for ten thousand years."

Hand half tilting, the cup spilling out a few drops of heavenly wine, Zheng Liu raises his eyes, "Madam needs not be so courteous."

Hearing that elegant yet lazy tone of speech, she faintly senses his extremely poor mood. Gui Wan regulates her breathing, from the corner of her eyes, she sees Li gong-gong's cold smile, an appearance of taking pleasure in other people's misfortunes, this even more confirms her speculations. In fact, since early this morning, she has already received the news from De Yu, Lou Che leaving the Capital has been confirmed, the Emperor's plans to establish the central academy has abruptly been rejected through a petition from the military governors, one can only imagine the annoyance in his heart right now.

"Madam, come accompany me in drinking a cup." Raising the jade cup that had already been placed on the table, personally filling up the cup, he beckons Gui Wan over.

There is only one seat by the table, Gui Wan had no choice but to sit down, accepting the cup personally filled by the Son of Heaven, unable to help but to feel somewhat anxious; the jade cup comes in contact with her lips, icy cold, the soft liquor trails down her throat, warmth running into her body, lightly tasting up to there, she places down the cup, praising: "Mellow and not strong, fragrance oozing into the heart, Xi Fu Feng Xiang, indeed lives up to its reputation."

"Madam has great wine taste, one drink and you can make out the wine flavour."

Gui Wan secretly found it laughable deep inside, the tribute wine sent into the palace this year, was prepared by the Prime Minister Estate, just that the abundance of Xi Feng wine jars were particularly unique, only because of this did she pay more attention in remembering it, and can also causally speak of it right

now.

"This year Yong Zhou paid tribute with seven jars of Xi Feng wines, said it is Xi Fu Feng Xiang, Long Ao Jiu Tian, of unspeakable value." The corner of Zheng Liu's lips raises up, exhibiting a feeling of pleasure, half squinting his eyes, those orbs locked onto Gui Wan, "Only today did I find out, amongst the seven jars, two jars have already entered the Prime Minister Estate's wine cellar." (Xī Fǔ Fèng Xiáng / 西府凤翔 — Phoenix circling the air above the west estate; Lóng Áo Jiǔ Tiān / 龙翱九天 — Dragon soaring the nine heavens)

"Your majesty is the monarch of yesterday and tomorrow^[2], possessing the entire world, why would you care about a mere two jars of wine?" Gui Wan smiles as she answers with ease.

"Seven jars of Xi Feng wine, the Prime Minister Estate owns a share of two jars; I possess the entire world, don't know whether the Prime Minister Estate also wants to take a piece of the share?" A sharp flash sweeps past his orbs, he stares into Gui Wan's eyes with gentleness lightly floating on the surface, but is also hidden with unlimited feistiness and biting chills.

The wine that she has drank is like a little ball of fire in her stomach, warming up her entire body, but being stared at by Zheng Liu like that, waves of chills runs through her. Gui Wan raises the wine flask on the table, gently pouring him some wine into his empty cup, seeing the translucent colour of the liquid within the cup, she laughs like the refreshing breeze, one hand holding the cup, one hand supporting the bottom, she slowly delivers it to Zheng Liu, "Your majesty, legend says Yong Zhou is the land the phoenix is born from, phoenix circling the skies of the nine heavens, hundreds of birds entering the court, that is the true Son of Heaven. No matter how many birds there are within the woods, could it be that they can rob the phoenix off its elegance? Your majesty is worrying too much."

Zheng Liu gaze remains locked onto Gui Wan, observing her expression, that elegant smile fades away, seeming to be thinking over her words, shortly after, a faint smile finally spreads, so pure it cannot possibly provoke mixed thoughts. Extending his hand to accept the cup of wine being delivered from across the table, right when Gui Wan's hand was about to let go of the cup, he abruptly hooks onto her fine jade-like finger, a gentle use of strength, also holding

intolerance towards rejection, fingers crossing over one another, he completely buckles up their fingers together, no gaps exposed. Two hands holding that one cup, the jade cup slightly tilts, fine drops of wine spilling onto Gui Wan's forefinger, her brows immediately knits together, wanting to retract her hand, Zheng Liu tightens his hold, not at all giving in to her intentions. A gentle lowering of the head, taking a drink of that sweet and smooth as silk Xi Feng wine, upon seeing the bottom of the cup, he still does not let go, lightly raising their interlocked hands, watching the drops of wine that had just dripped onto Gui Wan's hand, slide down following his movements, Zheng Liu once again lowers his head towards Gui Wan's fair finger.

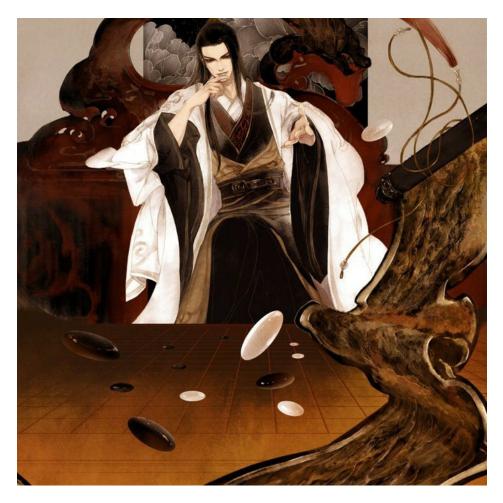
With one gentle movement, a pair of red lips and a jade finger forms a picture together, filled with slyness, Gui Wan's heart had almost stopped beating, a numbing feeling spreads from her forefinger, looking at that area of spilled wine Zheng Liu extremely ambiguously placed a kiss on, somewhat alarmed, even she herself could not react in time, when her hand had already forcefully flung away, breaking free from Zheng Liu's fastening, the jade cup flies aside upon release, smashing against the ground, the shattering sound of clear jade rings. Zheng Liu was stunned, looking at Gui Wan, his gaze focused, deep, and relentless.

"Clear but not light, concentrated but not brilliant, sour, sweet, bitter, spicy, fragrant, a harmonisation of various flavours, but not overpowering, a clear and elegant fragrance, sweet and nourishing, like moon like wine." Zheng Liu melodically says with tender affection.

Calmly retracting her hand, acting as though the incident just now did not happen, Gui Wan although angry, did not show any signs of it, tightly pressing her lips together before going along with his words: "Indeed a great wine."

"What I speak of, is but not the wine....." Deep orbs staring at Gui Wan, Zheng Liu seemingly real, seemingly fake.

A soft sound of a cough coming from Li gong-gong's mouth, abruptly breaking though such sentiment filled with traces of ambiguity, Li gong-gong pretends to sooth his throat, softly calling out: "Your majesty......" Before he even finished speaking, he catches glimpse of Zheng Liu's half real half fake expression, and actually felt a chill, that feeling of being struck by horror from before, once again rises within him.



Zheng Liu rather unnaturally gathers up that expression of his, once again displaying that complicated yet elegant behaviour, a deep voice asking: "Does Madam still remember our bet?"

"Gui Wan dares not to forget." Such deep memories of that type of killing intent, she is only afraid that she cannot possibly forget it in her lifetime.

"Since that is so, can Madam tell me, who has won right now?"

"The two year deadline has not yet arrived, how could your majesty speak so lightly of winning or losing?"

"Madam's words really are filled with confidence, you just said that I possess the entire world, so how could I possibly lose?"

Towards that type of self-confidence, that is more like arrogance, belittling others, Gui Wan laughingly says: "Could it be that your majesty does not know that worldly matters are half reliant on people, half reliant on the heavens? To win or lose, in the end you can only wait and see."

"That's right, half reliant on people, half reliant on the heavens," Zheng Liu slowly stands up, with three points of arrogance, "Until the final outcome, who knows who wins or lose? I am also curious, could it be that Lou Che really has a

stone heart?"

Hearing him mention Lou Che, once again gaining a sense of foreboding, Gui Wan raises her head to look at Zheng Liu, just happening to meet eyes with that interested smile displayed on his face.

"Do I still not have a move requiring the use of this crucial chess piece here?"

"Your majesty must be joking, Gui Wan still doesn't have the heavenly position to place down chess pieces right?" Well aware that this very moment is no longer the time to be pretending ignorance, it is better to put things clear.

Taking two steps closer, Zheng Liu devilishly raises Gui Wan's chin with one hand, gently caressing as he appreciates the fine and smooth feeling in his hand, deeply dark orbs staring into Gui Wan's eyes, tenderly saying: "Madam is too modest. This Xi Feng wine really lives up to its reputation, I seem to be a little drunk now." Surprised at the words he blurted out himself, he instantly releases his hands, lightly throwing back his sleeves, Zheng Liu takes a step away, diverting his eyes elsewhere, his behaviour returning to normal, an extraordinary splendour passing by his eyes.

"Since this bet is still going on, I shall also give it my utmost efforts. Madam, Lou Che took away my consort, right now Jing Ye is vacant, over time, would this not arouse suspicions? Since Madam is spending a short stay in the palace, why not move into Jing Ye, that way, I can also continue to be notified of Prime Minister Lou's previous repeated offenses, is that not right?"

Knowing that he is referring to the matter of Lou Che taking away Consort Ying from Jing Ye, lightly gritting her teeth in hatred, Gui Wan says nothing.

"Madam's demeanour is no less than that of the moon, then let us name Jing Ye main hall as 'Yin Yue Hall' (Hidden Moon Hall)." His cool voice seeming to carry no feelings, ordering the palace's Head Eunuch Li gong-gong.

Li Yu raises his head in panic, not daring to answer. The names of halls within the palace are only named for consorts, but what is this situation before his eyes? Just getting the feeling that the Emperor actions today are far beyond the usual, unpredictable, suddenly receiving a sharp sweep of the eyes from Zheng Liu, his heart trembles, hurriedly nodding his head saying yes, how could he dare to have any questioning intentions?

Gui Wan finds it laughable as she watches this scene, originally thinking she had escaped from being imprisoned within the Prime Minister Estate, looking at it now, she had only went through a change of cage. Pale resentment showing, she sits and quietly waits.

Turning to get a glance of Gui Wan, Zheng Liu's face displays unclear intentions, holding his hands behind his back as he takes his leave. Li gong-gong was left dumbstruck for a moment, hurriedly trotting along after him, wanting to speak up to inquire about the matter just now, but sees Zheng Liu's gloomy look showing no signs of dispersing, eyes filled with complexity, he immediately shuts his mouth, silently walking.

This Emperor with eccentric personality, joy and anger never truthfully displayed, exactly what is going on with him today? Such obvious mood swings that even his servant is able to sense it.

- [1] The proverb used for having everything planned out is called xiōng yǒu chéng zhú / 胸有成竹 which literally translates to having a complete [image of] of bamboo embedded in one's chest (heart) before painting bamboo, the image of bamboo is already in one's heart.
- [2] The monarch of yesterday and tomorrow is quite a strange translation that I looked up for jiù wù zhì zūn / 九五至尊 which literally translates to nine-five of supremacy, I know the nine-five makes no sense right now, but upon a little bit of searching up I found that one explanation for it is that, because back then the highest number was nine whilst five was the number perfectly in the middle, the numbers nine and five thus became a symbol of the Emperor's authority. I guess you can interpret this as nine being the highest, thus the Emperor being this superior human/son of heaven that you look up to, whilst five being in centre, thus the Emperor (as egotistical as it sounds) being attention seeking and self centred the important figure that everyone/thing revolves around.

Full

Finally we come to the chapter I've been dreading so much.

Honestly speaking, I feel that I have gradually been losing my initial enthusiasm to re-read this novel as I translate, sigh, sometimes the things you had read and enjoyed years ago just isn't the same when you go over it again after growing up. Though I must say, the author has a strange way of writing in an enticing manner that contains gripping feelings (be it negative or positive) that makes me want to read on, despite how I struggle to like some of the characters at times, but this chapter kind of crossed my tolerance level. When I first read this novel, I completely skimmed through this chapter and overlooked what actually happened in it, well I tended to skim through Zheng Liu's bits anyway haha. And after reading this chapter in detail for the translations, I felt uncomfortable with translating it, and was considering to just summarise the latter half of the chapter to avoid getting down to the details, but in the end, I just decided to go for it, which spurred the motivation for the recent burst of updates, though the translation of this chapter in particular felt like forever.

A little warning that this entire chapter evokes so so much negative feelings in you, everything and everyone (except De Yu and of course General Lin) started to either annoy me, frustrate me or disgust me here. Luckily things get better after this ... well sort of, there's still angst mixed in and so on but yeh, anything is better than this chapter...

You may have already noticed, this is a double update. That's because I actually finished translating chapter 26 (part 1) before this chapter just to make myself feel a little better, and felt that you guys would need it too. Therefore, if you want to save yourself from treading into this minefield of negative feelings, do feel free to just skim through this chapter (like I blissfully did back then) and move onto the next one, no one will blame you for doing so.

Also, I just really really want to express my thanks to you all, I'm so touched that everyone is still following me through this translation project despite the frustrations it brings, with General Lin as our only source of appearsment, I swear the angels sings to us every time he appears...so really really, thank you. I myself admit that I totally dragged you all down with me onto this...I wouldn't even call it a rollercoaster ride, more like a drop tower(?)



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dangerous Situation Deep In The Palace

Several boxes, outlined in gold, were placed within the hall, once the lid lifts open, inside there lays silk and satin, pearl and agate stones, against the candlelit background, they appear even more like an overspill of radiance, of extraordinary glamour. The palace maids' tender and smooth hands organises the things inside the boxes, that type of value and luxury in their hands, tosses and turns, passes on, running along with the flow.

Gui Wan quietly sits by the side, those beautifully arched brows lightly knitted together, cold eyes indifferently watching, such radiance and luxury in her eyes, were no different to thorns, the rays of light reflected on her serene face, yet it is unable to reflect the hidden undercurrent of anger and resentment, sorrows and worries.....

She never knew that disappointment gnaws on people like this, just like an invisible needle, little by little, piercing into one's heart, yet not even a drip of blood is shed. It has already been over two months since she started staying in the palace, yet the news that are being passed along into her ears are so

unbearable. Sending for San Niang to investigate Nan Jun and Luo Ling, was only in hopes of striking some luck, who knew that they actually hit spot on.

Lou Che taking Consort Ying out of the palace, Lou Che and Prince Duan in cahoots, Nan Jun, Luo Ling and other places' are in remonstrating conflict with the reforming of the central governing institutions within the Capital. Each and every piece of such facts, conveys the most recent huge matters within the imperial court, at the same time, it also highlights the awkward position she is in. Lou Che has really abandoned her......in the end, is it her who overly underestimated his decisiveness in grasping hold of the situation, or did she overly overestimated her own value? Turns out that the difference between the two of them is this big.

Don't blame him, cannot blame him.....in face of the changes within the Capital, him leaving the Capital City is a wise move, is a necessity within the power struggle. Such facts have also proven that this chess move is incredibly ingenious, the Emperor is also facing a dilemma from both ends.....

Is she not to blame him? Her heart feeling a slight sense of pain, Gui Wan half lays down her body, leaning against the long chair, taking advantage of her posture, she buries all the melancholy in her into the silk brocade, his every actions and every reasoning, could it be that they can really be covered up by two words of "don't blame"? What he has wounded, is the pride that she accumulated from the coddling she received since young, is her carefree nature like that of the clear skies, is her deeply contained, unrevealing heart......

How is she not to blame ah.....?

.....

In her moment of haziness, she seems to hear sounds of gentle calling, lifting those curtains of eyelashes, her eyes brightens up, De Yu stands in front of the bed, solemnly keeping his head bowed, seeming to have stood there for a long time, yet there is not the slightest look of impatience. Gui Wan props up her body, immediately noticing there is already no one else within the hall.

"Madam, although it is already nearing summer, but the night air in the back palace is cold, please take care of your body." Having just entered the hall, finding her alone lying on the long chair, wearing only one layer of clothing having just finished bathing, not even covering herself with a single silk quilt, thus causing him to receive a fright.

Gui Wan vaguely answers, looking at him, "This late, to come here, do you have matters?"

"Have matters to report. Having already followed Madam's orders, all has been prepared now, only lacking a final boost of assisted strength now."

"En," Gui Wan sits up straight, her fingers combing through her hair, "Getting rid of him, is also beneficial towards you, as long as Li Yu is the Head Eunuch within the palace, you will be under his containment. Not to mention, it inconveniences me from leaving the palace....."

This Li gong-gong, has been harbouring hatred for her, persistently troubling her these past two months, at first he masqueraded himself as a spy planted by Lou Che in the palace, keeping an eye on the Empress, although the current situation may have been reversed now, it is not like he can seek refuge by the Empress' side, therefore seeing which way the wind blows, he started bootlicking Consort Yin, in order to seek a backing force for his future career. This person is very narrow-minded, with a strong sense of vengeful spirit, loyal to the Emperor, and also difficult to manipulate for her own use, not to mention that if she is to escape the palace in future, as the Head Eunuch of the palace, Li Yu will undoubtedly pose as a great obstacle, and must therefore be eliminated.

Sorrowfully sounding a sigh, Gui Wan sinks into deep thoughts, these past two months, she has sent for De Yu to bribe the personal maids serving Consort Yin, Consort Yin is frank and outgoing, but her ears are particularly soft, easily listens to calumny, listening to the words passed on from her personal maids, she has already grown sceptical towards Li Yu's loyalty, with the Emperor also not visiting her palace as of recent, she has long felt greatly dissatisfied, placing all the blame onto Li Yu alone, thus growing more and more suspicious, regarding him as a thorn in the eye.

Just lacking a little more, borrowing the hands of Consort Yin to eliminate him, is only lacking the opportunity to do so, just one blow of the wind from west to east.....

"Madam, wanting to eradicate Li Yu, cannot be done in haste, need to wait for

a good opportunity." De Yu advises, recently, Gui Wan's way of doing things has been somewhat impatient.

A smile of astringent flavour spreads, Gui Wan nods her head, how is she not aware that such matters must not be done in haste, but the one prodding at her to hurry up is the current Emperor. His increasingly strange attitude, has given rise to the feeling of fear within her. His behaviour seemingly real, seemingly fake, very mixed, unsettling. Making regular visits to Yin Yue Hall every day to rest, gradually, he no longer treats her with fake grace. When approving official documents within the hall, he sometimes grows tired, not caring about the masses of palace maids, insisting on wanting her to personally brew a cup of clear tea, read a section of text, or even search for a book within the hall for him. Sometimes he would suddenly fly into fury, not allowing a single person to enter the hall, after a while, he would once again ask for her to brew him some clear tea.

She can no longer stay within the palace now, must leave soon, even if she does not know where she is to go once she escapes, she must still get out of this golden cage.

"Madam....."

"When the time is ripe, you shall replace him, the day you become the Head Eunuch, will be the day I can leave the palace." Grandly saying this, Gui Wan leisurely smiles, scenes from her memory suddenly flashes by, one person's figure suddenly seeming to standstill for a moment, she blurts out, "If this does not work out either, there is still one person who can save me."

"Madam is referring to....."

"General Lin." In that instance, the image of plum blossoms appears hazy, the embroidered handkerchief promise once again rings within Gui Wan's ears.

Sounding a sigh, De Yu frowns as he worriedly looks at Gui Wan. In such a situation ah, how could it simply be described with one word of "difficult"?

He completely empathises with Gui Wan's situation, it is not just the matter of being put in a difficult spot. Today he has already received the most recent news, stating that Prime Minister Lou and Prince Duan, Prince of Nan Jun are soon entering the Capital, wanting to seek an explanation regarding the Changes of

Feng Shan, taking on a confrontational stance against the Emperor, the situation within the imperial court filled with unrest, everyone feeling insecure, chaos to be triggered at any given moment. The Emperor has power, Prime Minister Lou has force, Prince Duan has reasoning, exactly how will the situation turn out in future? He has been keeping all this news from Gui Wan, she already seems to be treading on thin ice right now, how could he bear to let her add frost onto snow at a time like this?^[1]

"Madam it's better to get an early rest, matters within the palace, I will sort out with greater care." Softly spoken in a reassuring manner, De Yu takes hold of a thin silk quilt, flatly laying it on the side of the long chair, just as he was going to withdraw, a ruckus can be heard from the doors.

The two of them makes eye contact, both finding it strange, this Jing Ye strictly prohibit others from entering, right now it is also night time, who is able to cause a ruckus outside the palace right now?

The noises are getting closer and closer, De Yu decisively turns around, heading towards the side hall entrance, his and Gui Wan's political alliance is extremely secretive, as though if others are to find out, it will definitely lead to infinite causes of disasters, such that they have been resolutely avoiding.

"Lord Guan, you cannot go in....." The two palace maids are blocking the arriving person, not allowing for him to step inside.

Gui Wan carefully looks over, three figures were entangled in a struggle by the entrance of the hall, Guan Xiu Wen in the midst of charging inside, the two palace maids unable to prevent him, all the way until they reached the inside of the hall. The youth that has always had an image as clear as water in her mind, was harbouring fury in this very moment, his face sullen, those soft facial features appearing stiff, expressing an air of cold cruelty.

Raising her hand to stop the palace maids, Gui Wan coldly commands: "Withdraw." She deeply understands the survival of those who resides within the palace, the two palace maids were also afraid to bear responsibility, naturally not daring to speak up, and quietly withdraws.

Guan Xiu Wen stands within the hall, silently unmoving with that sullen expression, within those orbs staring at Gui Wan, certain feelings flashes by, not

only deep but also persistent, the simmering anger from before, seeming to have no place to vent, thus his facial expressions changes over and over again. The hall's doors were half open, the moonlight leaking in, a shadow extends from his feet, that water-like person should obviously be indifferently clear, but his shadow is actually as black as night, the tall and slender shadow like a figure of black, lonely and undisturbed.

Facing this youth, Gui Wan's feelings are somewhat complex, his very doings, she can more or less make out, behind the matter of Lou Che entering the palace, he also contributed, she should be hating him, but in her eyes, he always had that appearance of harmless elegance, humans are very strange, they would usually believe in the facts witnessed by their eyes, that is why she cannot bring herself to hate, not to mention, back then it was her who brought him into officialdom, that lengthy hate thus transforms into blame, mixed with guilt, and in the end it transforms into faint anger and stream-like gurgling of pity.

Guan Xiu Wen slowly approaches, only ten steps away, yet he seems to have been walking for his entire life, that expression of obscurity slowly gathers away, once again restoring that bright clearness, spreading a smile that can rival the sunlight, walking up to Gui Wan, his shadow covering up Gui Wan in this half bright half dark room, he very gently speaks up: "Are you willing to leave this place and come with me?"

Gui Wan was stunned, steadily eyeing him, the endless flow of thoughts from just now seems to have been frozen by this one phrase.

In her memories, there was once a time within the back courtyard of Jing Ye, where this same phrase was heard, it is just that this phrase, was what she said to this youth, right now......the situation is completely reversed......

Fate ah, truly is a ridiculous joke......

Gui Wan smiles as she shakes her head, "Xiu Wen, I will not leave." Although she is desperate to get out the palace, she is not willing take this risk, not to mention, in the end, is this youth friend or foe?

The instant he heard this answer, Guan Xiu Wen's face clearly expresses bitter pain, as though he could not breath, only after heavily taking a deep breath, was he able to barely sustain that perfectly clear smile, carrying a look of silent

infatuation he gazes at Gui Wan, waiting for a very long time before he speaks again: "Why? Is it because of Lou Che?"

Seeing him directly call Lou Che by his name, Gui Wan was stunned, answering: "No."

"No?" Because of this answer, he appears pleased, followed on by another round of thinking, Guan Xiu Wen's expression once again turns sullen again, "Then why else? Could it be......because of his majesty?" Carefully looking at Gui Wan's face without blinking, observingly.

Two months already, his heart has been desperately burning, unable to sleep peacefully every night, everything went along as planned, the only deviation is that Gui Wan actually ended up in the palace, his thoughts grows anxious, this was unforeseen. The Emperor's strange behaviour as of late, he has heard in his ear, seen in his eyes, desperate in his heart. Today, taking advantage of discussing official matters within the palace till late, he breaks into Jing Ye at night, the moment he sees Gui Wan, he immediately has his mind set, to take her away from this back palace.

A feeling of unease piles up within his heart, like an invisible thread tying him up, unable to break away from it no matter how much he tries. Over this past half of the year and more, only when he sees her within the Prime Minister Estate, would he finally feel a moment of comfort, leaving the Prime Minister Estate, that throbbing pain grows even more intense than when he enters the Prime Minister Estate. This enchanting beauty of the Prime Minister Estate, like poison like antidote, his thoughts grows eager, like illness sinking into the bones, the heartbreak of love, deeply sinking into the heart. Just like that, sometimes pained, sometimes comforted, day after day, in the end, he actually cannot even feel that throbbing pain anymore, as though it is a feeling he was born with, he even fell in love with this pain.

She is his poison, also his antidote, he has never considered whether he regrets it or not, only because he has already long sank into this pitch black abyss, the only salvation is her one frown one smile, curing his poison, solving his feelings.

But what she had said brought upon such tremendous heart pain that he cannot even breathe. And then personally hearing her say it is not because of

Lou Che, his heart suddenly lightens up, one rise one fall, only from those few words from her, since when did it start, his world has been twisted into such state?

The look in Guan Xiu Wen's eyes were growing increasingly strange, presenting some sort of pain and struggle, his face is clearly still smiling, yet within that bright smile, their braces bleakness. Affected by him, Gui Wan also seemed to be speechless, only sensing the constant overflowing feelings of sorrow leaking out from the youth's body, wearing away the air and night.

Guan Xiu Wen extends his hand, carrying a look of obsession, gently stroking Gui Wan's face, "Is it because of.....his majesty?"

Struck by surprise, Gui Wan did not avoid his hand, a burst of warmth spreading from her cheek, raising her eyes to look at Guan Xiu Wen, she suddenly finds that she has never actually truly gotten a clear look of him. "Xiu Wen, exactly what is up with you?" Unable to resist pulling away from his impudent touch, Gui Wan straightens her face, turning three points colder.

Her two words of "Xiu Wen" has always been the comfort to his soul, but seeing her appear displeased, he frowns, his chest feeling stuffy, without even thinking, he seizes Gui Wan's wrist, pulling Gui Wan down from the long chair, "Leave this place with me."

Barefoot stepping onto the floor, an icy coldness that pierces through the heart, Gui Wan under immense shock, wanting to throw him off, but his grasp on her was extremely tight, she could not even turn her wrist, feeling angered, she coldly says: "Xiu Wen, what are you doing, let go of me."

Guan Xiu Wen turns a deaf ear as he continues pulling Gui Wan along towards the doors, pulling her into the middle of the hall, up until he hears the person behind sound a painful cry, did he seem to snap out of it, stopping in his steps, he abruptly turns around, his eyes overflowing with pain, "Where does it hurt? Let me take a look." As if their senses been switched, it seemed just like the one who was pained was him, and not Gui Wan.

Barefooted on the cold ground, and the burning heat from his hand became a sharp contrast, Gui Wan's heart was thrown into chaos, thinking back to the past happening, she grits her teeth as she speaks: "Exactly what do you want to

do? Could it be that you still haven't harmed the Prime Minister Estate enough?"

Guan Xiu Wen froze on the spot, asking in confusion: "Are you blaming me?"

"Could it be that I cannot blame you? Exactly what are you doing, no matter what, Lou Che is also the teacher that elevated you, has never done you any wrong, why must you hit him when he's down^[2], deceiving him into entering the palace, could it be that officialdom is truly that great, worth having you give up your righteous heart in exchange?"

How did this youth become like this, could it be that she was wrong from the start, having mercy on him was wrong, leading him into officialdom was wrong, was all of this all wrong?

"He has never done me any wrong, but has he not done you wrong? He and Consort Ying has not cut off lingering relations^[3], he has not treated you right, he is undeserving.....undeserving of having you." With the mentioning of the wound in his heart, Guan Xiu Wen could not restrain himself, his feelings immediately getting worked up again, "I was only one step later than him, just that one step. It is him who grasped hold of power over the court and public, attracting his majesty's fear, all of this he has called upon himself. You think that I deceived him into entering the palace? If he himself is unwilling to enter the palace, who is able to force him? Him taking away Consort Ying is the absolute truth.....he is actually as cunning as such, with nets above and snares below in the palace, he was still able to escape, and has even joined forces with Prince Duan now....."

Seeing him speak so incoherently, extremely emotionally instable, Gui Wan calms down, hearing up to this point, she could not help but to cut him off saying: "It was you lot who set up a trap within the palace, and then let him escape?"

"That's right ah....." Guan Xiu Wen suddenly calms down, with seeming appearement he reveals a smile, "Didn't think that he is this omnipotent^[4], to be able to escape from deep within the palace. But it does not matter, so what if he has joined hands with Prince Duan, Prince Duan's crime of plotting treason is already set in stone, wanting to stand back up, is simply wishful thinking. Within the Capital City, his majesty has already heavily planted imperial forces, no

matter how powerful Lou Che is, he still would not dare to return at this time."

Hearing such words naturally makes Gui Wan's heart turn cold, once again looking at Guan Xiu Wen, sensing that he does things strangely, his thoughts surreptitious. "Why must you do this? Lou Che is the teacher you are indebted to in this officialdom, Prince Duan has supported you in many areas, yet you frame them with no distinction between right and wrong......" How could you be this terrifying? This latter half of the sentence, she did not utter a word of, Gui Wan looks at Guan Xiu Wen carrying gentle warmth in his smile, not only bizarre but frightening under the moonlight.

"How could there be no reason, Prince Duan and I, were originally using one another, I too have but only used his name during the Feng Shan assassination. As for Lou Che, that can also only be said as him asking for it himself......Gui Wan, come with me, let us leave this place......Gui Wan, Gui Wan, Gui Wan......" From his lips, he continuously mutters the name that has always been lingering within his heart, the youth appears both happy and also sad, his hand tightly grabbing hold of Gui Wan's wrist.

Up until this very moment, did Gui Wan finally come to a vague understanding, the Changes of Feng Shan was perhaps the Emperor's strategy, but to say it correctly, the one who carried it out was this youth. Then with each and every one of the following actions, what role this youth played in it all is just as she can think of.

Hearing her own name repeatedly being softly called out from his lips, Gui Wan was completely stunned on the spot. This youth's methods are as vicious as such, but it just happens that he is also this deeply loving and crystal clear, two types of extreme contradictions manifested within his body, blending into one. So sorrowful tonight, a sense of whistling wind persistently lingers on his body. Sinking deep into this cold night, even the figure of the moon grows sorrowful, Gui Wan was unable to utter a sound, nor did she know how she is to speak up.

So this is how it is, turns out the source of all troubles is herself. Gui Wan reveals a bitter smile, her and Guan Xiu Wen staring at one another in still silence.

Guan Xiu Wen had long been unable to take anything else into his eyes, to be

able to be with Gui Wan alone like this, his heart has completely sunken into intoxication, senselessly standing still within the huge hall, with an endless sense of loneliness and sorrows.

It is in this moment of one in a dilemma, one in an obsessive state, that the sound of hurried footsteps nears the doors, the palace maid that was blocking Guan Xiu Wen before loudly calls out: "His majesty has arrived——" Seeming afraid that those within the hall is unable to hear her, this call out is particularly sharp and resounding, travelling into the hall, it instantly breaks through the hazy atmosphere filling the room.

Guan Xiu Wen was thunderstruck by this sound, snapping awake, his face suddenly darkening, seemingly bitter.

And when Gui Wan heard the palace maid's voice, she could not even bring herself to smile, the Emperor has never come to Jing Ye at this time before, what is up with today? All matters are crowding together. She raises her head to take a look at the moon still hanging high up, lightly asking within her heart: Moon ah moon, could it be that this night really can't get any more difficult? The dark night is as long as such, just when will it be daybreak?

Heart beating rather fast, Gui Wan flashes a thought, making a prompt decision, with a flip of her hand, she grabs onto Guan Xiu Wen, quietly saying: "What you still stood frozen for? Quickly go hide in the side hall." She figured out that De Yu gong-gong has already left from the side hall by now, allowing Guan Xiu Wen to go to the side hall, be it to hide there, be it to escape from there, all in all she must not allow herself to get into trouble again. Letting the Emperor see that deep within the palace, there is actually a man showing up in the dead of night, who knows what calamity it could cause? Whilst thinking this, she pushes the dumbstruck Guan Xiu Wen towards the back of the hall.

Mind thrown into chaos, only after receiving a push from an outside force, did he quickly snap out of it, Guan Xiu Wen filled with bitter sorrow, the look in his eyes slightly settles, giving Gui Wan one last look, a face of great difficulty and unwilling, his hand releases, and in the end he still turns around, resolutely walking towards the side hall.

Seeing his shadow fade into the side hall, she unconsciously lets out a deep

sigh of relief, Gui Wan's eyes sweeps towards the doors, the Emperor has just stepped into the hall, separated by the dimness of the moonlight, she temporarily could not get a clear look of the expression on his face. Up until the shallow light of the faint moon brushes half of his face, did it clearly reflect the seemingly exhausted look on his face. Having never seen him display the slightest bit of weariness before, Gui Wan receives a shock, how much pride the Son of Heaven holds, he is just like that dragon throne, even though it is already covered with innumerable blood spilled on it, in outer-appearance alone, it is forever spotlessly clean, that type of desolation caused by many years of erosion resides inside, left for him alone to get a taste of, reflected on the outside can only be luxurious glamour, that is for others to see. Be it of bitterness, be it of sweetness, all is what the Emperor presents to everyone, everything is more or less a show that he has staged, deluding everyone, whilst carrying a purpose, after a long time, this all becomes a cultivated personality just like the monarch before her eyes, with unsettled temperament, sometimes angry, sometimes happy, in the end is it putting on a show, or is it in his nature?

Not knowing what is up with tonight, perhaps it is the moonlight that turned cold, perhaps it is the loneliness of that figure, perhaps it is the kindness in her heart surging up, facing Zheng Liu, Gui Wan carefully takes a look at him with her heart, rather than just with her eyes. Suddenly finding that there is an additional sense of human touch to this monarch, it is not that fake gentle warmth, nor is it that deeply embedded maliciousness and insidiousness, but like that of a common man, there is just that type of subtle expression, making him appear like a completely different person.

Blinking her eyes in disbelief, Gui Wan appears somewhat startled as she meet eyes with the Son of Heaven's orbs that are as gentle as shallow streams, his eyes are so deep so dark, and even carries a slight suppression, containing something Gui Wan dares not to get to the bottom of nor does she dares to touch.

From afar, catching a glimpse of Gui Wan standing alone in the middle of the hall, Zheng Liu receives a slight shock, upon getting a closer look, he finds that she is actually standing barefooted, with one layer of clothing, just one lonely shadow. He has come to this palace hall countless times before, every time he

comes, it is always brightly lit, Consort Ying is extraordinary in both beauty and talents, coming here is just like coming to a land of tenderness, but such glamorous beauty is always carrying false pretence and superficial behaviour, thus making the entire hall appear small, today there is only one person within the hall, appearing particularly vast and empty, yet it gives the place a different type of flavour, bringing a sense of reality into this palace hall. She is not as beautiful as Consort Ying, but why is it that she is able to give him such feelings? A certain something deep down in his heart has been awakened by a soft calling, eagerly wriggling to take action, before he comes to a realisation, a sense of pity surges up within him, crashing through that ice-like surface.

"The cold night like frost, why are you standing here?"

Having just been stirred into disorder by Guan Xiu Wen, her body has already grown numb, under Zheng Liu's sound of reminder, she feels a sudden recovery, a floor of ice-cold below her feet, her body even more so senses the chills, only inhaling mouthfuls of cold air, her body slightly shrinks, under the eyes of the Son of Heaven, she dares not to rashly return to the long chair, hooking up a smile, lightly answering: "It's already almost summer, there's no harm."

Even Zheng Liu did not know how much his own expression was overflowing with tenderness, gradually walking up, seeing Gui Wan's complexion appear pale, without the usual flawless exquisiteness, with only that billowing leisurely bearing, making his heart throb upon seeing her. Lowering his head to take a look, her bare feet, that pair of feet that never sees the sun is not only delicate, but also carries a point of baby-like clearness, of flawless white jade, sparkling clean, standing on this ground of black ice, looking even more enchanting. He lowers his body, squatting down.

The monarch of the country kneeling down, appearing half the height shorter in front of her, Gui Wan hurriedly takes a step back in fright, just as her right foot slightly raises, it is seized by Zheng Liu, a sense of blazing heat spreads from the bottom of her foot, Gui Wan freezes on the spot, not daring to make a single move.

The sparkling jade foot in his hand, Zheng Liu smiles, not minding the ice cold, only noticing that his large palm just happens to perfectly hold this one foot, extremely fitting. Having looked all around, he finds that there are no silk shoes

or anything of such sort within hands reach, lightly sounding a sigh, his one free hand unties the knot under his collar, the cloak releases, he pulls it off in one go, matting it under Gui Wan's foot, allowing her to step onto it, whilst softly explaining: "The ground at night is most cold, passing through your body, can easily lead to ill health."

If she is to say she has received a fright, this is undoubtedly the second time today, Gui Wan did not know how she is to react, to have one's feet stepping on the Emperor's cloak, such a thing is simply unheard of, even cold sweat has been scared out of her, yet Zheng Liu actually forcibly presses her feet onto the cloak, she does what she is ordered to, only afraid that a little mistake will lead to disastrous trouble. Right when she was feeling at extreme unease, Zheng Liu raises his head in that squatted position, his face carrying a relaxed smile, as though he made a great achievement. This is the first time Gui Wan has seen this practically innocent look on him, her heart hit with yet another fright, just how many more firsts are there today, how many more fright is she to receive? Slightly lamenting at the same time, didn't think that this deeply unpredictable Son of Heaven actually has a time like this, the Son of Heaven, in the end, is also an ordinary person ah......thinking this, her heart softens up a few points, eyes sweeping across Zheng Liu, sweeping past his nose, his eyebrows, his hair, stopping at that spot, she remains silent.

"What's wrong?" Zheng Liu asks, suddenly finding Gui Wan's stiffness.

A smile shallow like green waves, Gui Wan lightly knits her brows as she softly says: "Your majesty, you have white hair." The words having just slipped out her mouth, was immediately met with regret, exactly what is up with tonight, even she has also lost her usual bearings? No matter what, the other person is still the Son of Heaven, despite the unusualness of today, it cannot possibly change this nature, her feeling slightly restless, she is only able to silently wait for Zheng Liu's reaction.

His face practically making an immediate change upon hearing this, Zheng Liu's eyes darkens, sinking into deep thoughts, pressing his lips together as he remains silent. His half squinted eyes looking at Gui Wan, only now does he recalls, she is around the sweet age of twenty, a face blooming in radiance, the ripe age of a blossoming flower, as for him, already thirty years past his early spring, although

he is only just entering the prime age, but over ten years of age difference between him and her is also a fact. Hearing her mention the early whitening of his hair, his heart suddenly sinks, actually finding himself feeling concerned towards this problem.

"Your meaning is......I'm old?" Zheng Liu raises his head as he speaks, that slightly uncertain expression carrying a hint of awkwardness, makes Gui Wan unable to help but to secretly find it funny upon seeing this, usually it is only him who laughs at other people's anxiousness, now he finally gets a taste of it himself.

Zheng Liu stares at the slight reveal of her pleased look, his face easing down, lips lightly hooking up, displaying a hint of helpless smile, standing up from his squatting position, he has never thought that there would be a day, someone would be able to put a stop to his flawlessness, unwillingness within his endurance, reluctance within his anger. Gaze locked onto her, under the moonlit night, a corner of her thin layer of clothing slightly rising in the wind being blown in from the outside doors of the hall, well-proportioned and delicately beautiful shoulders made vaguely visible, such fair skin like a drop of the moon's radiance, scenes of Yu Gan Hall suddenly flashes by his eyes, his heart immediately sways, leaping up like fire, those deep orbs suddenly darkens, glowingly looking at her.

Seeing the look in his eyes. As though it can burn people, Gui Wan slightly shrinks her body, unconsciously taking a small step back, saying: "Your majesty, the night is already deep, please return to your palace."

Eyes seemingly lit on fire, circles around her entire body. Zheng Liu smiles, his mind tells him to take his eyes away, but his body seemed to have lost control, he actually did not divert his eyes away in the slightest bit, exactly what bewitchment has he fallen into? Within his entire life, he has seen countless beauties, he himself admits that he has already past the youthful age of impulsiveness, with extraordinary self-control, so why is his heart so unquenchable right now?^[5]

Seeing the look in Zheng Liu's eyes getting darker and darker, Gui Wan's heart starts panicking, her body cold and fatigued, having exhausted her mind, she no longer has the capacity to pull through this unexpected situation, her heart

making a sharp turn, wanting to back away. Being stared at dead on by Zheng Liu, she dares not to make too big of a movement, her feet lightly nudges, forgetting that below her feet, she is standing on the cloak and not even ground, under a moment panic, her feet gets caught, before she could even withhold her balance, her body falls backwards, sounding a shocked cry deep inside, she had not yet blurted it out of her mouth, when a great strength had already hooked onto her waist, with lingering fear after the shock, Gui Wan looks at the Zheng Liu before her with rounded eyes, he is half containing laughter, those eyes looking even more deep, compared to her sorry self, he appears more elegantly contented. Anger rises within Gui Wan's heart, her body having lost its balance, can only grab onto Zheng Liu's sleeves, this feeling of falling under the wind, makes one feel somewhat wronged, wanting to support herself back up, yet Zheng Liu chooses to drops his hand in this very moment.

Gui Wan's body follows and drops down, a pain that unexpectedly hits her, Zheng Liu catches her body and places her on top of the cloak, she half lies on the ground, only upon hurriedly supporting her body, did she manage to half raise herself up, Zheng Liu's knees touches the ground, half hovering his body, and he already has her trapped between the ground and his chest.

"Your majesty," Gui Wan secretly filled with hate, speaking in warning, "Liable to lay oneself open to suspicion^[6], could it be that your majesty does not know to avoid arousing suspicion?"

"Liable to lay oneself open to suspicion?" Zheng Liu laughs upon hearing this, his voice turning a few points deeper, carrying a few points of huskiness, speaking tenderly with a seemingly devilish charm: "No need to use such earthly regulations to constrain me......" These words seemed to be also spoken for himself, he deliberately neglecting her identity, blurring the relationship between them both, exactly why is this? He too really wants to know the answer.

Seeing his half soft halt rigid attitude, she becomes deeply aware of the terrible situation she is in, Gui Wan grows anxious, her smile also fades away.

"What are you thinking?" A clean faint fragrance wafts out from Gui Wan's body, into his nose, enriching his inner barbarism, his heartbeat is also thumping in chaos, "If you must think, then take out a little share of efforts to think of

me." In this moment, it felt as though everything else is no longer important, country, power, misgivings, morals......all can no longer hold back this torment, he honestly complies with what his heart longs for, reaching out his hand, at the same she leans back, he tightly wraps his arms around her waist, kissing down on this enchanting beauty that has put him in absolute loss.

Being caught by him, Gui Wan's heart grew desperate as though it was burning, just as she opens her mouth to cry out, he takes advantage of this and blocks her voice with his tongue, the voice that did not manage to escape in time transforms into a sound of soft crooning amidst the interlacing of tongues, no matter how much she turns her head, she just cannot avoid his exploration, her hair long turned into a mess, like black silk spreading all over the ground, his blazing tongue in her mouth, wrapping around, half of his body pressing her down, not giving her any opportunity to escape, his kiss covering her mouth airtight, whilst taking away her breath, he transfers his own breath to her at the same time, by doing so, no matter how unwilling she is, she is forced to accept this deep kiss of his.

Close to suffocating.....Gui Wan's entire body is covered in a thin layer of sweat, her body pressed under him unable to escape, she raises her hand, throwing it towards his face, amidst doing so, Zheng Liu catches her wrist, she wants to break away, but is no match against the strength of a man.

Ending one deep kiss, he smiles with evil craftiness, lips not leaving Gui Wan, a trail of kisses stopping by her nose, lips and her delicate chin, even their breaths were mixing together.

"You have already thrown away my hand two times, I don't even know why I myself......is able to dote on you......to this extent......even when you harmed...... my self-esteem.....I can still let it go......" Purposely being entangled with her, as he speaks, he kisses her with seeming playfulness, one big hand seizing her wrist, placed above her head, one hand on her body, because of the struggle, her clothes were a mess, exposing a shoulder, with one great exertion of strength, he rips off her thin layer of clothing, untying the knot of her undergarment behind her neck, a great view of spring before his eyes, Zheng Liu's eyes turns even more darker, even his head has gotten too hot to even think properly, lowering himself onto this fair jade-like body.

"No....." Lips constantly being intertwined with his, body held under him, she did not even have the chance to cry for help, and a broken cry sounds from her mouth, Gui Wan's heart aches, a drop of tear running down her face, "Lou Che....." Unable to help but to think of that man in this moment, she quietly calls out.

Half squinting his eyes, Zheng Liu's face instantly turns grim, raging anger growing more intense, unable to suppress his jealousy, his hands exerts more power, confining her body, he tears off his waist belt, laying his body on top of her, harshly scolding: "Do not call him......" Wildly kissing down on her neck, half soft half harsh as he caresses her fragile and soft body, such fine and thick kisses gradually reaches her cleavage, his big hand rubbing at her waist, the tightening and loosening rhythm faintly discernible, Gui Wan mutely calls out, drops after drops of tears like the rain.

Noticing Gui Wan's body feeling unwell, Zheng Liu slows down his action, seeing her face filled with tears, his heart is hit with pain, enduring it, gently stroking her cheek, he places a kiss on her eyes, the tip of his tongue collecting those tears into his mouth, it is clearly of bitter taste, yet he cannot taste this at all, only feeling that even her tears carries a fragrance, kissing her reassuringly, he softly says by her ear: "Don't cry......what do you want? I will give it you......I will give you anything, as long as you genuinely smile at me......" A gentle sounding of comfort, he breathlessly pulls her into his arms, skin against skin, heads rubbing past one another, the hand around her waist does not loosen up in the slightest.

What if I want freedom? Gui Wan was dying to say this upon hearing his words, but if it is to be in exchange for her body, she is not carefree and easy going to this extent, closing her eyes, she tightly presses her lips together, saying nothing.

"Gui Wan, you just go in accordance with me." Vaguely muttering, Zheng Liu lifts her up, turning her back, he in turns kisses her back, delicately fair jade like skin, he endlessly wanders in savouring, breathing growing increasingly short, even the air he breathes out is scorching, smooth tender white body against his, he and her endlessly at it. Imperial robe falls to the ground, all that can be heard is the sound of breathing and also the withered soft hums that were tender but

unloving.

"Your majesty....." Sounds of hurried running enters the ears, Li gong-gong's voice closes in from afar, stopping outside the hall, the opening of doors sounds, sudden but stops halfway, Li Yu stands by the doors of the hall stunned, reaction showing complete loss.

His hands did not stop, hating to be unable to have her body submerged into his bones, surging ahead, having not gotten his relieve, for the sole reason that she has eyes tightly closed and her tightly gritted teeth causing those lips to whiten, he is greatly reluctant to truly obtain her, afraid that he will obtain her body today, thereby losing the opportunity to obtain her heart.

"Your.....your majesty, there's......there's a military situation, General......

General Lin urgently asks for an audience......" His mouth does not have its usual nimbleness, Li gong-gong stands trembling by the doors, unable to enter, unable to withdraw.

Restraining himself, Zheng Liu keeps Gui Wan's body covered inside, seeing the corner of her eyes appear to contain tears, his heart could not bear it, softly sounding a sigh, he endures it for a long time, grabbing the clothing on the floor beside him, he slowly helps Gui Wan cover up, a soft voice carrying regret: "Don't cry, today it is I who offended you, don't cry anymore okay? It I who was reckless. Give me some time, I will definitely give you a status, I will keep you for sure......" Softly placing a kiss on her face, Zheng Liu pats her shoulder, tenderly comforting her.

Li gong-gong had long turned into stone, personally seeing the Emperor grab the imperial robe, actually draping it over Gui Wan's body, and even continuously talk to her so softly, humbly, such attitude, has practically already put down the pride of the Son of Heaven ah, being overly shocked to this degree, he could only watch on dumbly.

Not bothered to take to the trouble of comforting the person in his arms, Zheng Liu has a sort of stance as though he will definitely not leave if he does not see her stop crying, Gui Wan has long been hoping for him to quickly leave, nodding her head a few times, slowly opening her eyes, meeting Zheng Liu's both surprised and relieved eyes, Zheng Liu upon seeing her open her eyes, finally

loosens his tight hold on her, helping her stand up, caressing her face, he helps pull over her clothing, looking at her with reluctance, up until traces of tears have faded away, did he turn around, ready to leave. Li gong-gong collects himself, following after him.

"Your majesty, your clothing....." Li gong-gong anxiously calls out, afraid that the Emperor will leave the palace in just one layer of clothing.

"Return to Zhang Ning Hall for dressing." Zheng Liu's voice gradually grows further away from the palace hall, asking as he walks, "This late, what has General Lin entered the palace for?"

"It was Deputy Head Eunuch De Yu who brought him into the palace, said there are important matters to discuss with your majesty."

The desolated palace hall has once again restored its quiet, no longer are there any sounds by her ears, Gui Wan's heart makes sudden rises and sudden falls, filled with anger and resentment, the raging anger in her heart continues to burn, only feeling extremely sad, the tears no longer able to flow out, gently wrapping her body, standing in the same spot unmoving. From hearing Li gonggong's words just now, did she find out De Yu saved her, heart struck with a thought, she quickly paces up to the side hall, taking a look inside, nothing there at all, only then did Gui Wan gained a little peace of mind, turning back to look around this cold and large hall, a burst of desolation, filled with a sense of boundlessness.

She cannot possibly blame others, only able to transfer all this hate onto Lou Che, thinking that if not for dilemma of the Prime Minister Estate back then, how could she have been subjected to the shame of today? In her times of distress, he has never appeared to save her.....growing more and more angry the more she thinks about it, not only did she think everything over again, she suddenly remembers what he said before he left, mushroom garden date......seems to be a mushroom garden, exactly what is the meaning?

- [1] Add frost onto snow xuě shàng jiā shuāng / 雪上加霜 means to add misfortune onto misfortune.
 - [2] The original Chinese proverb to describe the situation of hitting someone

whilst their down is luò jǐng xià shí / 落井下石 which literally means to drop stones on one who has already fallen down the well.

- [3] The proverb Xiu Wen uses to refer to **not [completely] cutting of lingering relations** is **ŏu duàn sī lián /** 藕断丝连 which literally translates to **lotus roots breaks, the fibres remains linked together**.
- [4] The proverb for **omnipotent** in Chinese is **shén tōng guǎng dà /** 神通广大 literally meaning **of heavenly powers and extensive reach**. A term used to refer to one's **superb skills and abilities**, another less powerful translation would simply be resourceful.
- [5] The original phrase used for unquenchable is xīn yuan yì mǎ nán / 心猿意马难 which originates from the term xīn yuán jì fàng, yì mǎ nán shōu /心猿既放, 意马难收, the phrase literally translating to heart let loose like wild apes, reasoning difficult to hold back like wild horses, describing the uncontrollable shift of inner thoughts, difficult to withdraw. Simply put, it refers to when one loses control of their inner selves.
- [6] The idiom behind the meaning **liable to lay oneself open to suspicion** is called **guā tián lǐ xià /**瓜田李下 I'm not sure if there is a proper idiom story behind this but the idiom literally translates to [in the] melon patch, under the pear [tree] one must not bend their waist to brush off their shoes in a melon path, to avoid accusations of stealing melon; one must not raise their hand to organise their hat under a pear tree, to avoid being suspected of stealing pears. This idiom itself **refers to placing oneself in a suspicious position.**

Deep sighs, after the way Zheng Liu acted to Gui Wan in the last chapter, who would have thought that he would take it to a whole new level of disgusting, actually, as I got to translating Zheng Liu's part here, a part of me wanted to give up translating...ugh he just disgusts me too much for me to handle the details. Not to mention, I never hated an author so much for ruining my little moment, at first I was thinking — aw maybe he isn't all that bad, maybe he can be quite likeable, seeing him take down his cloak for her — but with everything that followed on from that very point, my face gradually contorted into pure ugliness of disgust. And then there's Gui Wan, who was of course greatly affected by this immoral act, but I don't know what the author was thinking to have her recover quick enough to think about the meaning behind the mushroom garden date.

You can't deny that all this, she had brought upon herself, that was the one time Lou Che did something right, yet she herself was the one who did not give him the oppurtunity to save her

...I should just stop here, I think I just bottled up all these negativity for too long...anyways, I'm gonna shut up now, let's just move along now to the next chapter

Part 1



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Crushed Jade (Part One)

I need to leave the palace.....

This thought has been repeatedly going through Gui Wan's head countless times, but up to this very moment, she is still within the tall red tiled walls, looking at that strongly fragrant tree green and lush, she sighs her faint sorrows

and clear worries, what is she waiting for? Repeating this over and over again, she self-stops, self-asks, self-sighs, the longer she stays in the palace, the more indistinguishable the entanglement becomes, increasingly coiled, virtually like a sticky spider web, coated with a body of foulness, and even carries the pain of rotting heart, eroding bones.

"The white gull [as though] asking me, mooring that lone boat, is the body being held back, [or] is the heart being held back? Should your heart remain [here], why are [your] brows knitted together.....?" [1] Sitting in the back courtyard of Jing Ye, here, every little thing, every scene, is no different to the Prime Minister Estate, hooking up her long drawn out feelings, there is no one who does not speak within the palace, she softly sings out.

The Emperor has changed, since that bewitched night, it has been over a month, he seems to have been constantly changing. The detainment within Jing Ye has loosened, she can freely wander around the palace, the palace maids and eunuchs' addressment have changed, "Madam Lou" has changed into "Madam Wan" overnight, softly sounding a laugh, Gui Wan's singing voice turns a few notches higher, how could she possibly not understand the Emperor's intentions, as they say, if the name is not right then the speech will not be in order, and if the speech is not in order then nothing can be accomplished. The Emperor deliberately blurs her identity, for the four words of "correct titles proper words".

A monarch's feelings of passion appears ruthless.....

Waves of howling passes by her ears, the scene of Li gong-gong's death a few days ago once again appearing before her eyes. Originally thinking that leaving the palace still required the golden opportunity of eliminating Li Yu, who knew that she would actually happen upon such chance a few days ago, Li Yu has always been bending the laws and acted domineeringly within the palace, a few days ago, just when he was moving out the obsolete treasures from within Jing Ye, he ran into the big-bellied Consort Yin, perhaps Consort Ying truly is the pain in the hearts of all women in the back palace, even if it was only spotting a few things, it was enough to touch upon Consort Yin's wounds, she flew into great rage, in addition to the long been over-provoked emotions, originally holding great dissatisfaction towards Li Yu, taking advantage of still carrying the dragon

child (emperor's son), she insisted on punishing him. Gui Wan upon receiving the news, headed to the imperial garden to check out the situation, just happening to run into the Emperor who also came having received the news.

He originally wanted to save Li Yu, in the end, for some unknown reason, he actually endured it, personally seeing his own trusted confidant Head Eunuch get beaten to death under the wooden stick. In this situation, Consort Yin was able to enjoy a round of glory, thus demonstrating she is the Emperor's current favoured consort. Li Yu's death, is favourable and harmless to Gui Wan, but to personally see him lose his life because of such offenses that can be deemed big or small, a sense of fox grieving over the death of rabbits evoked within her. When the Emperor was walking past her side, he softly says: "Since you wanted him dead, I granted you. As long as you wish, I will fulfil whatever you want." This sentence, upon hearing it, a chill ripples through her entire body, howling in the cold, Zheng Liu ah Zheng Liu, are you truly this secretive and unpredictable, with everything in hand, exactly how much has he seen though?

These red walls forever unending, connecting together everywhere, this imperial palace, just like a pit of tigers and dragons. "Past travelling friends, are they still there? [Recalling] the building amongst the flowers, the boat under the willow trees. Dreaming, dreaming, even dreaming cannot bring me back, [only showing] the cold water and air of emptiness [before me]." [1] Words and tones painting vivid scenes, entangling of tender and grace, her beautiful figure in palace outfit, singing alone in infinite solitude, singing of opera, singing of people, singing of gut-wrenching love.

How long has it already been since entering the palace? Winter goes spring comes, spring goes summer at its peak, everything rustling by in a blink of the eye, it is actually coming up to five months, De Yu is already the Head Eunuch, she also has the opportunity to leave the palace, but why is she in delay, unable to decide, what is she waiting for?

Suddenly finding, that the world is such a big place, but there is just no place for her, cannot return to the Prime Minister Estate, also cannot seek refuge at Older Brother's place, taking the initiative to find Lou Che.....will he welcome her with a smile?

Thinking back, in this world, is there anyone waiting for her? And where is her home? Does it have a light, a seat, a cup of tea, the sound of tenderly long greetings specially set up for her, whilst waiting?

She is no deity nor demon, just an ordinary mortal, unable to get rid of fame and fortune, such that is difficult to resist.....where love lies, deeply grieved, and how is she to speak up, Husband ah Husband, still remember me?

Still remember me?

"[Staring at the] misty yellow clouds (dim skies, snow clouds), [snow] soaking through cotton [clothes]. They all say no one holds such deep sorrows like me, amongst the snow tonight, there are plum blossoms, like the melancholy in me....." (The plum blossoms covered in plain white, like his sorrowful heart)^[1]

Summer fills the air, plum blossoms that had long fallen, sparsely scatters, the subtle fragrance eliminating the dust, in this blazing glory of the burning sun, only she still feels the cold, always maintaining a touch of brilliance unaffected by the world, is such a difficult task ah......

The resonant sound of applauding fills her ears, Gui Wan looks back, the Empress' clear figure of lilac, an embroidered gown with wide sleeves, a lone shadow gracefully standing in the courtyard, smiling as she gazes at her, "Like the melancholy in me.....how truly penetratingly you sang it."

How long has it been since she last seen the Empress smile at her in greeting like this? Seeing it right now, it actually feels a little unreal, as though looking at it through a thin coating, unable to refrain from guessing what the deeper meaning behind this smile is, originally thinking there were still three points of sisterly love, this too has faded due to such thin coating that cannot be pierced through.

"Your highness." Gui Wan softly greets as she approaches, saying, "What wind has blown your highness here?"

"A family does not have to be so polite to one another," The Empress leisurely says, such graceful bearings rarely seen in this world, "Why should the two of us still act like strangers?"

Affected by her word of "family", Gui Wan creases her brows, only able to

smile as she looks at the Empress, waiting for her to speak of the meaning behind her visit, every little action of everyone within this palace, all harbours deeper meanings, with absolutely not a trace of waste, be it laughter, be it love.

"What? Are you blaming me for the cold shoulder I have been showing you recently?" The Empress laughingly asks, "This palace is very cunning, who doesn't live carefully? You should not blame me, I too had no choice."

"I know." Had no choice, everything resorts to having no choice. But once one does something wrong, the best excuse are those words, Gui Wan meekly smiles, the clear wind far and near.

Eyes circling around Gui Wan face, the Empress softly sighs as she says: "I know what you are thinking, Gui Wan, you and I ought to be the closest people in this entire world, it is regrettable we turned out like this, all is fate fooling with people. What I owed you in the past, I have never once forgotten, today I ask you this one last question, do you still trust in me?"

Does she still trust her? Gui Wan was just thinking this, hesitating, yet her mouth had already fought to answer first: "Trust."

The Empress' calm face finally reveals true sincerity thanks to this one word of trust, sighing as she says: "Prime Minister Lou has already returned to the Capital yesterday, in a little while, he will be entering the palace, would you like to go see him?"

Surprise clearly displayed on her face, Gui Wan steadily looks at the Empress, seeming to want to make out what is true, what is false from it. In the quiet afternoon of calm wind and peaceful trees, she hesitates indecisively, see or not to see, caught in between a dilemma. An unsmooth feeling surging up her chest, her smile is no longer pure, braced with complex emotions, it appears to be filled with difficulty, "Okay, I'll see him."

"What is this place?" Following the Empress in slithering their way around the palace, they arrive at a small narrow room, looks like no one has lived here for ten years, Gui Wan could not help but to ask, her heart heavy with doubts.

"At the side is the west side hall of Chong Hua Palace," The Empress takes out

her silk handkerchief to shake off the dust from a table without any concern, carefully wiping the chair, she carefully explains, "The late Empress Dowager set up a secret chamber here, able to observe whatever is happening in the hall."

Noticing a landscape painting hung on the wall in front, with not a speck of dust on it, incompatible with the condition the room is in, Gui Wan approaches it, carefully observing, only then did she notice that the painting had been punctured, looking through the hole, this large hall that she has once been in with Zheng Liu, is presented before her eyes, perfectly clear, secretly taken aback, to say the finely designed layout of this palace is of wonderfully intricate workmanship is really no exaggeration.

The Empress takes out a pot of tea from who knows where, placing it on the table, pouring to cups full, she softly whispers to Gui Wan: "They are about to come, let us quietly wait here."

Gui Wan seeing her look of complete calmness, reveals a faint smile, they all say men are the ones who devise strategies in the command tent, ruling the world, but looking at it now, women knows of all movements best, political tactics from beyond the tent curtains are actually not at all any less. Leisurely sitting down, taking a sip of the tea, cheek resting in hand as they quietly wait.

The waiting time feel particularly long, the tea fragrance already fading, yet the main hall is still soundless with nobody there, Gui Wan casually looks around, her face displaying calmness, yet her heart is stirring with inexplicable feelings surging up.

"Does Minister Lou still remember this place by any chance?"

This gentle and refined voice travels into the secret chamber from within the hall, Gui Wan and the Empress both receives a little shock, the two of them meeting eyes, the Empress attentively looks into the punctured hole, Gui Wan remains motionless, gathering up her smile as she concentrates on listening.

"Chong Hua Palace side hall......your majesty is in very high spirits today." Hearing this clear and smooth voice like that of the wind, Gui Wan's brows lightly creases together, the one who has disappeared for nearly five months, has he finally returned?

"Minister Lou has returned from Nan Jun, and even prepared a big gift for me,

how could I not be happy? That is why I have thought to make a trip to this place, all is thanks to your blessing....."

"This subject should be thankful of your majesty, if not for your majesty's grace, how could this subject possibly go to the land of Nan Jun....."

Listening to them both acting so perfunctorily and courteous in the hall, happily getting along harmoniously on the surface, when in reality, bladed hearts lies beyond the honey coated tongues. Gui Wan spreads a satirical smile, this pair of monarch and subject, deep with shrewdness, heavy with calculating hearts, can also be said to be well-matched.

Chatting in the hall in a you speak I follow manner, they have only been speaking of insignificant matters, Gui Wan sends the remaining tea in the cup down her throat, watching the Empress return to her seat. The hall suddenly becomes quiet, silent and stuffy. The Empress was absolutely puzzled, was just about to go up front to take a peek again, when the voices sounds once again.

"Lou Che, your eyes no longer holds this Emperor I, so why hold up such false pretence?"

This voice carrying severity within gentleness, the Empress' action of wanting to observe the situation freezes, Gui Wan also places down the empty cup in hand, the two of them equally oblivious to what happened within the hall, but could sense the atmosphere weigh down with an imposing air.

"Over and over again you have prevented the establishment of the central academy, and have joined forces with Prince Duan, Prince of Nan Jun, you really think there is no one else in the court?"

An elegant laughter sounds, "Since your majesty has directly spoken today, this subject would also like to directly speak words of persuasion, your majesty is eager for quick success and instant benefits, hiring large numbers of young beginners, marginalising the senior officials in court, doing this is although favourable in centralising power, but is not a good policy."

"Good," Zheng Liu also starts laughing, extremely arrogant, "Great words of persuasion, since you Lou Che became the prime minister, this is the most pertinent words you have spoken."

Following on was the sound of cups and plates, a voice thinly laced with laughter once again speaks up, "Back then when the Crown Prince advised me to kill you, I hesitated, thinking back to it, when it comes to reading people, Crown Prince's eyes are a level above mine."

"But Crown Prince's methods were viciously cruel, not listening to others' disagreements, an unfit candidate to become monarch." Lou Che gently follows on, his calm attitude appears very orderly.

"That is why you joined forces with the Empress Dowager in harming the Crown Prince with slow poisoning, gaining a firm foothold, and then in the name of clearing the imperial family, exposed the Empress Dowager.....Lou Che, in terms of vicious methods, the Crown Prince back then cannot even compare to you in this case, from one little regular attendant to today's prime minister, you can be said to have been treading up in the blood of others."

After a moment of silence, Lou Che slowly speaks: "Your majesty's words are too heavy, this subject is unable to shoulder it, the Crown Prince's disease back then really had nothing to do with me, as for the Empress Dowager, that was because she wanted to get rid of me, therefore I could only take pre-emptive action, it was only for the means of self-defence."

"Planting your henchmen, power dominating over the laws of the imperial court is also out of self-defence?" Lightly containing his disdain, Zheng Liu sarcastically laughs as he asks.

"Otherwise, this subject would not be able to be drinking with your majesty today, head and body long been separated, compared to Crown Prince, your majesty is also much better qualified. 'Changes of Feng Shan', 'Sieging of Jing Ye', your majesty really had this subject perform poorly in handling these situations."

The Empress heart receives a fright upon hearing this, met with overwhelming respect, she turns her head to the side, Gui Wan in return smiles at her, that warm and gentle smile touched the Empress' heart, not knowing how, her heart also calms down.

The monarch and subject within the hall continues talking, the seemingly homely chat releasing a bloody air, you cheat me I outwit you. Between their

talking and laughter, the winds of change brushes by, the world, the country, the power holder, all seems to be a chess game, two people standing in opposition, competing to prove superior, the chessboard, being the world.

"Prince Duan has been waiting to be summoned from outside the eastern city gates for three days already, if your majesty continues to ignore this, I'm afraid that the commoner's "righteous" image will be damaged....." Lou Che thus advices.

"Prince Duan," Zheng Liu interestingly ponders this name he has not been hearing of for a long time, "Prince Duan, originally thinking he is arrogant and overbearing, really did not think that.....he is a man full of sentiment, for a woman....."

Sighing out loud, followed by a frivolous laugh raising three notches higher, suddenly stopping: "Lou Che, you taking Consort Ying out of the palace, I had originally thought you truly are so deeply affectionate, never did I think you would actually bring her to Prince Duan's side, thus creating the opportunity to form an alliance with Prince Duan. Only with such methods, can I consider it to be a little more meaningful, playing chess still requires an opponent, if there is no you Lou Che, this imperial court will inevitably become a lot less interesting."

Standing alone at the top.....hearing Zheng Liu's words, Gui Wan was suddenly hit with mixed feelings, savouring the meaning behind his words, dejection floats up. So frank and open between the two monarch and subject, clearly the forewarning of desperate battle. Power is so loveable and dear, compared to a beauty, it even more so has a hero willing to bow down to.

That is why, Lou Che is able to abandon Consort Ying, abandon her.....

Slowly getting up, the Empress turns her head in surprise, Gui Wan uses her finger to make a silent action, faintly smiling as she turns around, very gently opening the door they came in from, she says nothing at all, one person fluttering away. Behind, the Empress still appeared dumbfounded, unable to comprehend what is going on.

The path they took upon coming here, Gui Wan has already forgotten, following the many turns of the corridor, she slowly walks, head filled with no thoughts, just wanting to leave that stuffy place, her mind is at ease, but is also

empty, fleeting and unpredictable. Originally thinking she had many things to say, but right now not even a single word is able to come out her mouth.

Her chest feeling stuffy, suffocating......

Wandering around the palace to several places, coming to a stop every now and then, giving herself a break to think, unknowingly wasting a lot of time. The skies gradually masked, the sun already descending west, looking up, Gui Wan finally found the familiar place, feeling a little tired, she raises her strides into the palace doors, this courtyard of Jing Ye is exactly the same as the Prime Minster Estate, yet she just cannot adapt to it, her heart vaguely rejecting it, eyes sweeping across, fixing onto one spot, she is suddenly speechless.

Lou Che stands at the entrance of the Jing Ye hall, within his handsomely elegant smile there holds hidden irritation and displeasure, seeing Gui Wan slowly walking over, the corner of his lips rises, quickly heading over to her, "Gui Wan....." Thousands of words only comes out as a muffled sigh.

Gaze shining with brilliance, Gui Wan raises her eyes to look at him, "Lord Husband....."

Coming to a close proximity, Lou Che hears this and frowns, Gui Wan's addressment carries an overtone, husband is identity, lord is position of power, that addressment harbours estrangement. Heart secretly startled, he extends his hand, gently brushing the bridge of Gui Wan's nose, but also cannot bear to use force, lightly skimming past, he says: "I kept you waiting for a long time, let us return home now."

That voice is like the spring breeze containing laughter, blowing directly into her heart, leaving the palace is what she wishes for, Gui Wan nods. A cool breeze lightly raises, loose hair floating before her eyes, she had only just raised her hand, when it came in contact with Lou Che's finger, that long slender finger helps her gently brush back the loose hair behind her ear, and then with a hook of his hand, he takes advantage of the situation to gently pull her into his arms, "Angry? You can be annoyed, you can be angry, but you cannot deliberately neglect me like this. Gui Wan....."

Lightly letting out a sigh, Lou Che also did not know how to explain, towards the important matters within court, he is able direct situations at ease, without

the slightest hesitation, but towards this extremely coddled one, he instead has no idea how to handle her moods. She is always carrying a smile, smiling when angry, smiling when sad, even when she is feeling nothing at all, she is still smiling, after spending a long time together, did he finally know that it is a type of disciplined habit that has sunk into her every bone. Clearly aware that she is not happy right now, he feels somewhat incapable, if he is to hold her tighter, he is afraid of unintentionally hurting her, if he is to loosen his hold, he is also afraid that his feelings would not reach her heart.

Tired, so she is tired, lightly leaning against Lou Che, she originally wanted to back away, but in the end she could not bear it, five months of bitterness, in this embrace, fades, scatters, his one sentence of "let us return home now" by her ear, a trace of sourness, floats up her heart, arousing her infinitely tender heart. What should she trust in? Other people's words, or what she witness before her eyes? Before she could reach a decision, her heart grew tired, that is why everything can wait for later to bother about, silently saying this deep inside, for the first time in these five months, she feels so relaxed.

Gently hugging Gui Wan, Lou Che lightly pats her shoulder, like coaxing a little child, seeing her close her eyes, he knows she is exhausted, softly saying: "In Nan Jun I saw a particular palace lantern, delicate and lovely, I brought one back, what do you think of placing it in your room?"

"Palace lantern?" Gui Wan lightly rubs her face, her fan-like eyelashes slightly flutters, "Palace lanterns takes up space, I don't want it."

"I got them to make you a small one, hanging it in the room, using glass to create the surface....." Towards Gui Wan's wilfulness he was not bothered by it, and instead feels fortunate, her heart has not rejected him.

Seeing her not answer him, he knows she has agreed, Lou Che chuckles, continuing to speak of what he has seen and heard in Nan Jun, half coaxing half persuading, teasing Gui Wan to speak, wanting to resolve the knot in her heart.

The palace maids outside Jing Yi Hall were put in a difficult spot upon seeing the situation, a bold one amongst them, quietly leans in, her voice not resonant but still clearly heard by Lou Che, politely reminding: "Prime......Prime Minister Lou, Madam Wan, the carriage is already ready."

Lou Che's body suddenly stiffens, Gui Wan feels this, opening her eyes, she backs away, when her waist is clasped onto by Lou Che, Lou Che's other hand brushes through her hair, wrapping around her shoulder, very tenderly. But the eyes that turned towards the palace maids flashed with cold sharpness, waves of cold wind blows, "What did you address just now?"

The palace maid had already been petrified, not knowing what she has done wrong, submissively saying: "Prime......Prime Minister Lou, Madam......Madam Wan......carriage......"

"Impudence," Lou Che coldly scolds, "In accordance to habitual nature of addressing women in the palace, I Lou Che's wife, should be addressed as Madam Lou, could it be that you do not know?"

Legs giving away, dropping to her knees, the palace maid hurriedly kowtows, "Prime Minister Lou pardon this offense, this servant is listening to the commands from the heads....."

"Come!" Not giving the slightest chance, Lou Che loudly calls out, several guards from outside the hall floods in, standing in alignment, "Take her away, fifty slaps to the mouth, throw her out of the palace."

The palace maid continues to kowtow nonstop, pleading for mercy, the guards listens to the orders and immediately steps forward, dragging the palace maid out of the hall. The palace maids at the side had long been frightened to point of not daring to utter a sound, one tremblingly comes forward, "Prime Minister Lou, Madam Lou.....the carriage is already ready."

Sensing the fury diffusing from Lou Che's body, Gui Wan stays silent, sinking into thoughts, Lou Che had already lowered his head, "Are you tired.....we're returning home now."

Gently placing a kiss on her cheek, even the cool breeze was melting in this tenderness, carrying warmth as it blows.

From the palace to the official road there is a long path, red walls running down both sides, endlessly long with quite a large distant apart. Walking side by side with Lou Che down this path, Gui Wan looks ahead, unable to help but to

think back to taking a walk like this with Consort Ying, discussing the length of this long path. She said, when going there her eager heart like a shooting arrow, when walking back the path feels like a long journey, Consort Ying is very attentive with delicate thoughts, such that can be seen in this one remark. Right now, this path is still the same, her body already grown fragile, women of beauty that can overthrow cities, do they all suffer such fate in the end?

Her heart feeling cold, Gui Wan wants to withdraw her hand, with one little movement she finds that Lou Che has tightly clasped onto her hand refusing to loosen it, seamlessly joined together, with great strength, to the point it faintly pained her. Looking to the side at Lou Che, those thin lips tightly pressed together, that slight curve may be a smile but he is still angry, just when she was about to speak up, Lou Che suddenly slows down his speed, staring in front, his smile spreads wider, but those eyes of still pools appears to deepen.

"Your highness."

Through the final doorway of the deep palace, the Empress leisurely makes her way over, that glamorous bearing unchanging, smiling as she says: "Hearing that Gui Wan is leaving the palace, I came to send her off. Prime Minister Lou, can you let me speak a few words to your madam in private?"

Lou Che's deep eyes forms a smile, releasing Gui Wan's hand, he naturally takes a few steps back, "This subject thanks your highness for your grace and affection on Gui Wan's behalf." Hand forming a respectful gesture, he elegantly walks away, forming a greater distance from Gui Wan and the Empress, stationing himself in the rear area.

Gui Wan rotates the wrist that is already somewhat stiff, the Empress approaches, intimately holding her hand, providing her support, the two of them slowly paces forward.

"Why did you leave like that before?" The Empress softly speaks, "Did you hear something that made you uncomfortable?"

"Your highness is too considerate, the air was a bit stuffy in there, I only wanted to get some fresh air." Gui Wan smiles.

Holding up Gui Wan delicately fair hand, the Empress gently sighs: "In the end you are unable to trust me......Gui Wan, women has it difficult, residing deep in

the back palace, women in the estates of nobility has it even more difficult, the meaning of this, I believe you also understand, en?"

These words are really touching, containing a heavy weight, Gui Wan heart was moved, looking at the Empress, a smile of gentle warmth, seven points similar to her mother's, warmth rushing up her body, Gui Wan lightly holds the Empress' hand.

"Men's heart is set on the world, women's world is set on men's heart, this is difficulty of women. Having entered the palace for so many years now, I have come to realise a principle......" The Empress' eyes appears to turn hazy, seeming to be reminiscing something, her tones also sounds somewhat fleeting, "Rather than vying for doting love, better to vie for position, a woman's vanity is built on a man's power."

"Your highness....." Gui Wan was speechless, speculating the deeper meaning behind the Empress' remark.

"Gui Wan, today finding you to go Chong Hua Palace, I actually wanted to tell you, as long as you are willing, I am willing to share control over the phoenix seal with you, reigning the back palace together....." The Empress' words like a sudden clap of thunder, comes to a sudden stop.

Heartrate speeding up, Gui Wan releases her hand, glancing behind, Lou Che appears as though he is not paying any attention, only then does her eyes turns back to the Empress, deeply gazing at her, "Your highness, are you thinking right? How could you say such words?"

The Empress calmly smiles magnanimously, with unspeakable tolerance and tenderness, "You have seven apertures leading to an exquisitely bright heart^[3], how could you not know that my words all come from a sincere heart, I will only ask you one question, are you willing?"

Gui Wan steadily stares at the Empress, eye meet eye, she sees the deep hope inside, like shallow autumn pools, glistening under the sun, revealing a promising brilliance.

Firmly shaking her head, Gui Wan's lips forms a crescent moon, "I am not a phoenix, so how could I enter the imperial family, thanking your highness' good

intentions, but I cannot afford to undertake this."

Pausing for a moment, the Empress sounds a laughter, heartily laughing out loud, seeming happy but also seeming glum, a burst of laughter, even Lou Che in the distance peeks over in absolute puzzlement. Easily gathering up her laugher, the Empress seriously looks at Gui Wan, "Good......good, indeed exquisitely brighter than others, with pure graceful bearing alone, not many people in the world is able to match up to you, it is I who played the villain in vain."

As this woman deemed the mother of the country continues speaking, the tears in her eyes appears more evident, eyes turning red, Gui Wan upon seeing this, also senses the sour feelings stirring, softly advising: "Your highness needs not to overthink this, the road is coming to an end now, you cannot send me off further, quickly return to the palace."

Seeing the Prime Minister Estate's carriage and guards waiting at the end of the road, the Empress absentmindedly nods her head, opening her mouth to say something, but closes it again. Lou Che steps forward, looking at the Empress in wonderment, taking hold of Gui Wan's hand, he casts aside a word of "your highness we will be taking our leave now", and walks ahead just like that. The Empress dumbly remains standing on the spot, suddenly making a move, she quickly paces forward, pulling Gui Wan to a stop, she leans towards her ear, quietly saying: "Leave from Xuan Yu Gates absolutely must not head to Xuan Ji Gates, be sure to remember."

Gui Wan looks back at her in surprise, those dark orbs lightly turning, already able to work out the mystery behind it, warmth bubbling up, hundreds of feelings gathering in the chest.

"Thank you..... [Older] Sister....."

The Empress nods her head, and then shakes, crystal clear tears dripping down drop by drop, standing in the same spot, she watches Gui Wan and Lou Che aboard the horse carriage, the horse whip lifts, the gulu sound of the carriage wheels sounds, and only then did she collect herself, turning around, wanting to return to the deep palace, when she was startled by the towering red walls and long road ahead standing before her eyes, looking at this in daze, she carries a bottomless look of melancholy, slowly walking deep into the palace, where she is

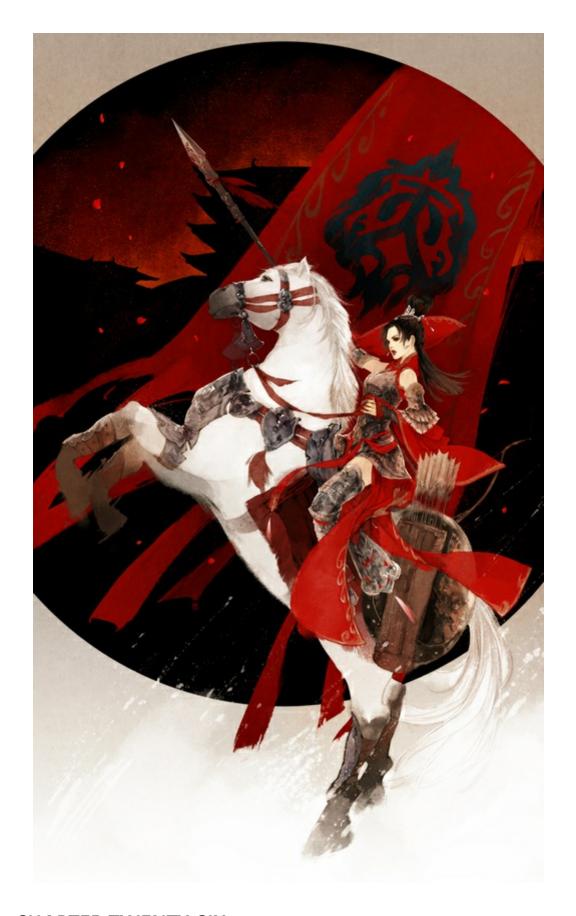
to be masked in vanity.

- [1] A poem of the Southern Song Dynasty composed by poet **Jiǎng Jié /** 蒋捷 called <u>Plum Blossom Citing · Jing Xi Snow Barrier</u>
- [2] Fox grieving over the death of rabbits or tù sǐ hú bēi / 兔死狐悲 is an idiom to say that even animals grieves for their kinds.
- [3] Seven apertures leading to an exquisitely bright heart or qī qiào líng lóng xīn /七窍玲珑心 the seven apertures are the seven openings in your head (2 eyes, 2 ears, 2 nostrils, mouth), the saying is used to refer to sensitive people who is able to thoroughly take in and assess situations, thus being smart enough to act accordingly.

Part 2

To those wondering how Lou Che was able to enter the palace so easily, in chapter 24, it is mentioned that rumours were spread stating that Lou Che has merely left the Capital to visit his hometown for a while. The fact that he ran away with a consort will only bring shame to the entire imperial family, so the emperor could not possibly announce his crime to the world. This also means that him casually entering the palace to visit the emperor is completely normal in the eyes of others, and so the emperor is not able make a big deal out of it either.

Also a fair warning for the weak hearted, you may want to prepare some tissues......



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Crushed Jade (Part Two)

"What's wrong? Not feeling well?" Lou Che raises his hand and places it on Gui Wan's forehead, finger lightly tapping the in between of her knitted brows, those eyes filled with warmth locked onto her, seeming to want to find some sort of

clue.

Lifting a corner of the carriage curtains, seeing the path ahead heading towards Xuan Yu Gates, her heart is slightly settled, Gui Wan turns her head to Lou Che, a face of beautiful jade, an air of pure nobility, sincere concern, a man of such elegance, of graceful movements, just what kind of heart does he carry? Heart feeling a little conflicted, she takes a deep breath, asking: "Where have you taken Consort Ying to?"

Lou Che was struck into a light daze, he did not expect Gui Wan to abruptly throw out this question, containing a smile as he says: "Yao Ying and I are already a matter of the past, difficult to mention, do not let it burden you." His voice carrying a light chuckle, seeming pleased.

"Husband, where have you taken her to? Is.....is it Prince Duan's place?" Stuck in her heart, compelled to speak of it, Gui Wan continues to ask, even if the truth is difficult to accept, she still wants to personally hear him say it again.

Smile gathered away, surprise flashes by Lou Che's eyes, "Who was it that wagged their tongue at you?"

Deeply sensing his displeasure, Gui Wan melodic voice sounds with a shallow smile: "That means, it's true then?"

The look in his eyes and the creasing of his brows deepening, Lou Che lightly presses his lips together, those deeply still and cold eyes looking at Gui Wan dead on, seeing her melodious state, light like the wind, he could not hold back his sigh, overflowing with tenderness, "I'm willing to explain, are you willing to listen?"

Looking at Lou Che confused, Gui Wan nods. Lou Che seeing this, once again spreads a faint smile, a deep voice saying: "That day, I came into the palace....."

"Lord Prime Minister!" A sound of loud calling, reaching their ears like thunder, cutting off the conversation between the two inside the carriage, Lou Che's pupils flashes a cold sharpness, that calm face slightly alarmed. Gui Wan is able to make out from Lou Sheng's voice, shock, Lou Sheng has always been a man who maintains his calm, is the pillar amongst the guards, what could possibly make him panic like this?

"Lord Prime Minister, there's an ambush at Xuan Yu Gates....." Amongst the loud shout, the sound of hooves from the guards seems a little chaotic.

Lou Che immediately raises his hand to lift the curtains, looking outside.

The curtain highly raised, entering the eyes were a scene of dark red, Gui Wan's heart instantly jumps. In the evening of the Capital City, sunset glow still lingers, covered in misty rosy clouds, dense like an ochre stone dyed red, occupying half the sky, the gathering of soldiers below the Xuan Yu Gates coloured under such picturesque scenery, coldly ready to kill as they stand in rows, blocking the way out. The leading commander is of petite stature, heroic air overflowing but is covered behind that delicately pretty face, a posture of howling autumn wind, bearings of rippling green water, as a woman she does not fall short of a man's charismatic leadership.

"Prime Minister Lou, his majesty has decreed, may Madam remain here, and stay in the palace for a few more days."

Sat high on the horse, Lin Ran Yi loudly announces her reason for coming, clad in a body of black battle gear, complementing her heroism, solemn just like a female warlord.

Gui Wan feels anger and surprise invade her body at the same time, hand clenching onto the floor cushion, pulling herself together without saying a word, she looks over the unfamiliar scene beyond the curtains.

Alarm flashing past his pupils, Lou Che remains by the carriage window, a shallow smile containing a dark chill, ridiculing: "A parade like this, is of hospitality? The Lin family has been flaunting righteousness for generations, never bully the weak, never disgrace goodness, such style of doing things today, this Lou can also be considered to have gained enriched knowledge, truly a loss of respect ah, Great Lin." Harsh words spouting from his mouth, smile floating into the air, not showing any panic at all.



Heng Dao 横刀 a type of sword from the Tang Dynasty



Mo Dao 陌刀 a type of sword/blade with a long handle

Sudden silence, Lin Ran Yi's face turns red then white, heng sword 横刀 pointing forward, voice stiffly following a given pattern of speech: "Prime Minister Lou should not blame me, I too am acting upon imperial orders, if Madam may step off the carriage now."

The soldiers blocking off the gateway are the Lin family's soldiers, their military capacity very orderly, the front row holding long handled weapons (陌刀), the back row lined with prepared archers, although they are making not the slightest movement, the oppressive air is already intensely spreading out.

Gui Wan attentively observes Lou Che's expression, afraid to miss the most subtle change, but that deeply still look of firmness is nowhere to be seen, his deepest thoughts unrevealing. Hand sensing warmth, she finds that Lou Che's big hand is tightly wrapping hers, resolute without the slightest of doubt or hesitation, at the same time he orders Lou Sheng who is closely following the

carriage's side: "Charge through."

To actually receive no answer from outside the carriage, Lou Sheng appears somewhat absentminded as he looks at the pretty figure on the horse in front, his face displaying an unfamiliar emotion, even the sound of shouting scraping past his ears was not heard by him, nor did he know what kind of feeling this is, up until he hears Lou Che's short shout of "Lou Sheng", did he finally snap out of it, the command entering his ear being "charge through".

Charge through? Forcefully charge through? Raising his head to look in front, he seems to hold all sorts of difficulty as he looks towards Lin Ran Yi, suddenly finding that she too seems to similarly have a vague look of confliction flashing by her expression.

Heart hit with pain, without the chance to carefully think over it, his hand already habitually grips onto the handle of his sabre, a sharp sound of metal, with a flash of silver, he brandishes the sabre forward, shouting out: "Protect Lord Prime Minister and Madam, head forth." Legs clamping onto the horse's body, arrows launched, the guards unsheathes their weapons in response to his call, all charging forward at the same time.

Shocked by this forceful momentum, Gui Wan watches the guards beside the carriage courageously leap forward; before her touched feelings came into play, the originally stopped carriage wheels once again starts to crazily spin, violently hurtling forward. She hurriedly holds onto the carriage railing to stabilise her body, her back seeming to have something to lean on, the fluctuating bumpiness did not seem to be too much either. Turning her head to the side, she meets that half hidden half sunken expression, Lou Che has his arms wrapped around her body, pulling her into his embrace, heart slightly settled, his mind moves to the outside of the carriage, a scene of chaotic confrontation, clashing of weapons, sound of ruthless slashing, practically makes one dare not to believe this place is inside the imperial palace.

The Emperor seems to be determined to have her stay behind, perhaps there is also the meaning of having Lou Che stay behind altogether. Armed forces of the Lin family are originally brave and fierce troops, operations following the law, vigorous momentum like a rainbow^[1], and the personal bodyguards of the Prime

Minister Estate are all highly skilled individuals carefully picked out by Lou Che himself, with both sides clashing, it is actually difficult to distinguish which side stands higher. One side firmly defending their ground, one side attacking with full force, such battle that originally still had room for the carriage to gradually approach Xuan Yu Gates becomes a brutal scene, murderous intent diffusing into the air, infectiously sinking into the people's minds. The Lin family's military troops have always been warriors on the battlefield, ferocious like a tiger; the guards of the Prime Minister Estate has gained the chance to take a plunge, vigorous like a leopard; a battle between tiger and leopard fierce and tragic, sorrowful howls, sounds of furious killing grows increasingly louder the more that it is heard.

Gui Wan is sad to see this, in the moment she shakes her head, she sees Lin Ran Yi and Lou Sheng fighting each other. The two people fiercely fighting, each swing of the blade alarmingly dangerous, each attack thrown vicious, fighting it out like their lives are on the line; but amongst all this there are also other factors that are affecting them, so every time they hit a moment of life and death, the blade skims past, not harming the other person, the two of them continues to fight on like this, in a situation where they themselves have not become aware of, they have already given up the opportunity to inflict any harm on the other person.

Taking this entire scene into her eyes, Gui Wan's brows weighs down with hidden concern, she has entered the palace for a long time, Lou Sheng has been staying in the Prime Minister Estate, and the one who was guarding the Prime Minister Estate would unfortunately be Lin Ran Yi right? Not knowing what exactly happened between the two people, but the affection flowing out from them cannot fool others, even if that love is hidden behind a thick layer of curtain. Allies and enemies, the haunting entanglement of love, has gained relief amongst this one fight to kill, amongst the light of the sabre and shadow of the sword, all sentiment and grievances have been reduced.

Eyes spotting the carriage almost reaching the Xuan Yu Gates, Lin Ran Yi swings her blade, the light flashing past his eyes, pushes Lou Sheng back, pulling at the horse to turn around, retreating back at the same time, upon seeing the unfavourable situation, she grits her teeth and loudly shouts: "Release the

The back row of archers that have not made a move yet, immediately pulls back the strings of the bow upon receiving orders, releasing the arrows, because they already received orders, not to harm the people inside the carriage, the arrows like a meteor shower all aims towards the guards of the Prime Minister Estate, avoiding the carriage location. Arrows descending like rain, the sharp sound of piercing through the air constantly comes charging towards the guards. The pointed arrowhead, difficult to guard against, no matter how skilled the guards are, they still struggle to cope, the team slightly scattered, their pacing starts to become chaotic, the horse carriage unable to move forward.

Inside the carriage, Lou Che deeply furrows his brows, eyes stilly looking outside the carriage, sweeping past the entire scene, shouting: "Kill your way past, first capture Lin Ran Yi, dead or alive."

Once the words got out, the guards loudly accepts their orders, Gui Wan struck with fright, a chill running up her body, Lin Ran Yi is not like others, is the friend she shared laughter with amongst the light breeze of the Green Sea grasslands, is the saviour she once went through thick and thin with, to treat her like this, that sound of "dead or alive" clearly carries the deep meaning of go for the kill with nothing at expense, heart slightly twitching, she shouts out: "No, not allowed to harm her......" Body tightening, firmly held back by Lou Che, the arm looped around her body strong like iron.

The guards did not necessarily not hear it, but they are only loyal to one person, that is Prime Minister Lou, the words of others, be it Madam, be it the Emperor, they do not have the necessity to care for, and so they still continue to charge towards Lin Ran Yi.

Lou Sheng is the one who is most at loss in this battle situation, his ears unable to hear other voices, only the sound of whistling from the biting cold of the western wind, the clash of armoury and blades, vigorous roars, all seeming to stop once it hits his eardrums, unable to pass on into his mind. Suddenly a large number of men and horses comes charging over, shattering his state of loss, the scene of blood red returning to his vision, looking forward, that delicately pretty figure on the horse, clad in black armoury, of brisk and neat heroic form. Riding his horse in approach, for a moment, he too did not know whether to listen to

orders and capture her, or to protect her from the harm of others, a sharp shadow suddenly pricks his face, with a wave of his hand, the light and shadow diverts to the side, scraping his face as it passes. A warm feeling comes flowing down his cheek, and only then did he realise, just now it was an arrow that grazed past him, as though he cannot sense the pain at all, he continues to ride his horse towards Lin Ran Yi, the dark liquid continuously flowing down his face, but he does not have the leisurely time to bother with it, bit by bit.....he is almost reaching......

"No——" A woman's scream pierces the ear.

All of a sudden, just how much of a light scattering sight this is, breaking through the air, blowing against his face, he could not react in time, everything blurring before his eyes, the black figure leaping over, he was just about to reach out to catch her, when their bodies collided, forceful impact, Lou Sheng holds onto the warm body, falling off the horseback together, the instant they land on the ground, his stunned soul also seems to have broken following the fall.

No.....this high-pitched scream remains in Gui Wan's mouth, someone has called it out before her, the woman's voice filled with panic that shook the entire scene. No one knew what had happened, all happened in that one moment, the archers of the Lin family troops were all stunned on the spot, because of Lou Sheng's approach, they thought he wanted to harm Lin Ran Yi, thus sent arrows charging at him. Upon seeing he is to be killed under the shower of arrows, Lin Ran Yi suddenly jumps out, blocking the arrowheads, even if the Lin family troops wanted to withdraw the arrows, there was nothing they could do.

Enemy and ourselves, in this moment is difficult to distinguish now.....

Why did she save him? The entire sea of figures froze at the same time, everyone asking this same question.

Lou Sheng tremblingly holds onto Lin Ran Yi's body, his face so contorted, one cannot make out his expression, half his face absolutely blurred from the nonstop bleeding, wide open eyes containing nothing at all, only monstrous fright and regret. Hand stroking Lin Ran Yi's back, on it were clearly three heart piercing arrows pointing at his eyes, his heart, how he wants to reach out to hold onto the handle of the arrows, but finds that his hands were trembling so much,

even the slightest bit of strength has been lost.

The person in his arms painstakingly raises her hand, bright red blood soaking into her black armour, only by devoting all efforts, did she manage to lightly struggle her way up to Lou Sheng's face, the corners of her lip squeezing out a smile with great difficulty, "Tired?"

Everything was invested into this one word.....

She actually has a lot of things to say, want to tell him to wear an armour under his military robes in future, because of the dangers of fighting, he needs to know how to protect himself, this boorish man lacks attentiveness, and would not be able to pay attention to such things; and want to tell him not to mind the first time they met, because she already does not mind anymore; also want to tell him not to practice martial arts during the wee hours of night again, the deeper the night, the heavier the dew, chilly air easily harms the body......also...... want to tell him to do many many good things on her behalf......but, there is no chance to anymore.

Lin Ran Yi's eyes very gently closes, leaving behind no conveyances at all, containing a smile, she gradually slips away from all contact with this world, life driven away, burnt out......

The entire sea of people silently watches.

Tears have already blurred both her eyes, Gui Wan silently chokes back her tears, heart feeling like a hole has been drilled through, such emptiness that can no longer be filled again, stomach lying on the carriage railing, everything before her eyes sometimes blurred sometimes clear, the dragon above that wall is baring its fangs and brandishing its claws, such magnificence as though it is about to fly into the skies, but that Lou Sheng's expression is blurred, a scene of bright colours, covering everything, a scene of blood red, grows larger the more it melts out, flowing onto the ground, half a sky of red sunset glow, seeming to blend together with the ground, other than red there is still red, other than blood there is still blood......

Blood red filling the entire sky.....

"Quickly open the gates, exit the palace." Amongst the entire scene, only one voice is cold, calmly seizing the opportunity, wisely commanding.

The carriage wheels once again starts spinning, bumpily rushing out of the palace, Gui Wan's gaze is fixed dead onto the centre of the scene, Lou Sheng is still motionlessly holding Lin Ran Yi, that poignancy, silences the entire land, everything sinking into solemnity.

The western wind once again rises.

Suddenly a cry as frightful as it is sorrowful roars out: "Ah——" Lou Sheng laments to the heavens, for the heavens to hear, for the earth to hear, for.....her to hear.....

Straight to the skies......

Who says heroes shed no tears, who says heroes have no regrets.....?

This love can become a memory to reminisce in time, just that by then it is already inconsolable......

Capital City, Lin Estate.

Since early morning onwards, there has been a constant stream of people coming to the estate, amongst them are officials in the Capital, there are soldiers who guards the frontier for many years, there are also small pedlars and menial servants, all without any exception rushing into the Lin Estate, to light some incense in offering to the Lin family's eldest daughter Lin Ran Yi, sending her on her final journey, occasionally there are people hiding their faces as they silently weep, sorrowfully expressing such regrets.

Just when the servants of the Lin Estate busy themselves with red eyes on this occasion, another lightweight horse carriage stops outside the estate. All eyes were attracted over, it is not that this horse carriage is any way luxuriously out of the ordinary, but because the coachman, a burly figure, on the left side of his face, from the corner of his eyes to his lower jaw, has two deep slashes, the wound with no dressing at all is only treated with some powdered medicine, from the wound that has not yet healed up, blood red flesh can be seen, horrifying to the extreme.

Descending the carriage to see this scene, everyone observing Lou Sheng with a strange look from time to time, Gui Wan looks around, was just about to call

Lou Sheng, but sees the muscles of that injured side of his face tremble, desperately trying to suppress something, not at all caring about everyone's reaction around him.

"Why the suffering....." Unconsciously, Gui Wan softly whispers, her voice slightly chokes back.

Why the suffering.....clearly knowing that coming would also deepen your wound that has not yet healed, why must you still come? During the deep night of the chosen date, the half-moon appears like a hook, night dew sinking into the clothing, Lou Sheng soullessly returns to the estate, his mouth containing sounds of mumblings to himself. Up until he sees Lou Che, does he bend his body and kneels down, his clothing covered in paint-like bloodstain, an entire face of devastation, using this kneeling posture, he masks himself within the sparse and blotchy shadows of the trees. Even Lou Che who never reveals his inner emotions, reveals feelings of deep sorrow.

After that, Lou Sheng stands alone in the courtyard, Lou Che solitarily sits inside the study room, silently spending the night. On the second day, master is still the master, servant is still the servant.

"Lou Sheng....." Calling him back to reality, Gui Wan steps through the doorway of the Lin Estate, to find that he is still dumbly standing outside the door, simply allowing the observing and gossiping to circle around him. Black pigmented brows lightly raising, she suddenly catches glimpse of the pain in his eyes, his dried eyes like a scene of emptiness.

Originally should not have brought him along. It was Lou Che who said, allow him to send her on her final journey, if not he will regret it for the rest of his life. A phrase of no regrets, in exchange for two times of heartache, feelings of sourness faintly surges up the heart. Gui Wan follows the Lin family's servant towards the ancestral hall, entering her eyes were white mourning dresses, a gloomy sight.

The death of Ran Yi, exchanged three days of calm, seeming to have washed everything clean.....

When leaving the palace, Lin Rui En was guarding Yu Xuan Ji Gates, Lin Ran Yi was guarding Yu Xuan Yu Gates, listening the Empress' words, they avoided Lin

Rui En, this is fortunate for Lou Che, but for Lou Sheng it is a pain that has been carved into his bones, imprinted in his heart, amongst the two, which is more important?

She is growing increasingly confused, worldly matters are never complete, never regular, never reasonable, what the eyes see and what the ears hear, are not necessarily the entire truth, just like the explanation Lou Che has given these past three says. Back then when he encountered the encircling in the palace, he planned to escape through the secret passage inside the imperial palace, in the situation he was in at that time, how could possibly abandon Consort Ying, abandoning her, would cause the Emperor to immediately turn the spearhead towards her instead. The love he had for her is no more, with good faith in surviving, he has promised to attend to her safety, thus would not be forsaking her in times of crisis. Taking Consort Ying along as he escapes the palace, he immediately orders to send a message to the Prime Minister Estate, before any reply was received, the Prime Minister Estate has already been besieged, he painstakingly waited at the mushroom garden for more than six hours, seeing that the Capital is immediately going to be closed off, he had no choice but to leave the Capital City.

These words resolved almost half a year of doubts, the burden in her heart has been lifted, but was replaced by chilling sorrows, all of this today, came in exchange for Ran Yi's life, this explanation was fulfilled by a bloodstained heroine.

Sinking into deep thoughts, she passes by the inner courtyard, wave after wave of sobbing sounds from the large hall, a black wooden coffin stood in centre, on top of the coffin, is a single deeply engraved seal "福" (blessing/good fortune), passing through the heavy crowd, Gui Wan looks stunned at the figure stood stationed by the coffin's side.

Lin Rui En silently stands at the side of the mourning hall, expression even colder than usual, the lighting inside the hall is slightly dim, the slightly weak candlelight next to the memorial tablet reflects across his eyes of impassive waves, other than silence, there is only indifference.

Gui Wan passes by a few people, heading straight to the middle of the hall,

sincerely offering incense, faint smoke forming waves as it diffuses before her eyes, the view of snow white before her eyes seems to have transform into a shroud. In this scene of pure white, a colour of bright yellow partially enters her vision, turns out that a long case is placed right in centre of the hall, it takes only one look, for Gui Wan to guess the significance behind it, it is the imperial edict the Emperor has just issued, claiming the eldest daughter of the Lin family died a sudden death due to severe illness, and personally written an order to bestow Lin Ran Yi with the title of "Princess Hu Guo". The truth is thus effortlessly buried within that long case just like that, with no one ever to speak of it again. (Hù Guó / 护国 means protecting the country, Ran Yi's title of Hù Guó Gong Zhǔ / 护国公主 literally means princess who protects the country.)

"Ran Yi....." Slowly lowering her hands that offered incense, Gui Wan raises her head towards the memorial tablet, "Do protect and bless him a lot....."

That boorish man who never let slip a single drop of tear is crying for you, can you hear it? Ran Yi.....

"Madam." Lin Rui En takes a few strides forward, facing the side of Gui Wan's face, "May I invite Madam to venture into the back courtyard for a talk?"

His extraordinarily determined demeanour tells Gui Wan that she cannot reject him, Gui Wan does not utter a word, following him in quietly withdrawing out of the mourning hall. The light breeze knows not of sorrows, carrying three points of sweetness as it brushes the face. Their steps coming to a stop in the back courtyard, an entire courtyard filled with chrysanthemums, the flowers flourishing and the stems stands strong, dancing along to the movement of the wind, an elegant brilliance.

"Sister loves chrysanthemums most, says chrysanthemums are noble, just like an extraordinarily famed person unyielding towards flattery with great integrity."

Looking to his half depressed half clear eyes, Gui Wan discovers a feeling called "pain" in them, "General....." Just like how she is with Lou Sheng, she is unable to speak up in consolation.

"Our father passionately loves the art of war, an entire life spent on a battle horse, hoping for future generations to inherit such ambition, but his firstborn is actually a daughter, because of this, our father took not even a step into the house for a half a year, and later gave birth to me outside, bringing me back home. Sister has since never even gotten an ounce of love from our father, but Sister is very strong, contending for first place in everything, giving up on all things girls should care for, clearly of female body, yet insists on learning the aspirations of men." Lin Rui En strolls in front of the chrysanthemums, extending his hand to lightly hold a chrysanthemum flower, half open like a firework, "Sister complied with the Lin family's motto, her entire life for the country, resolutely fighting in battlefields, resisting foreign enemies, guarding the imperial power....."

The Lin family's blood, should be shed whilst resisting the enemy in the battlefield, should be shed whilst defending the motherland, their flesh and blood, exists for the monarch, exists for the people, exists for the country......

Slightly filled with sorrow, Gui Wan remains frozen for a long while, lowering her head to look at the entire courtyard of chrysanthemum, speaking with realisation: "General may speak directly....."

Silently glancing over at Gui Wan, Lin Rui En's entire face of solemn desolation, "Monarch and subjects at odds in the imperial court, certainly due to the division of power, everyone unable to become one at heart, is regarded as a great taboo to a country. The Nu Tribe resides in the far north, a tiger carefully gazing over, the borders cannot have a day of relaxation, military governors of several areas holds great numbers of their own troops, difficult for the imperial court to control, six government divisions in the imperial court looks to Prime Minister Lou's command, and newly promoted intimate ministers listens to the orders of his majesty, wanting to reform the institutional system, such a deadlock, for such a long time, is unfavourable to the country, Madam......what should be done from henceforth?"

Hearing his speech, Gui Wan was oozing with cold sweat, the current situation has been charted within her heart, but has never been as clear as this before, Lin Rui En spoke of the question she has been desperately evading, this game of chess, played to this point, how should the following moves be played? There is no tie in the imperial court, the finale can only be determined by win or lose, who is the loser? And who is the winner?

Taking a look at the cold and stern general before her, she suddenly discovers, he is a silent tiger, coldly watching everything unfold, not make the slightest move, armed forces in his palm, heart like still water. It is not that he does not understand how to play with power, rather, he does not wish to play with power, Zheng Liu and Lou Che's heart is placed on the imperial court, and his heart, perhaps remains above in the vastness of the skies. The sword in hand, is not for himself, nor for power, it is for the people, the country, this is the pride of military personnel, his achievements, his mightiness all comes from every sword and sabre fought on the battlefield.

This entire courtyard of chrysanthemum seems symbolic of the Lin family, unyielding, unbending, cleanly standing proud.

"General's meaning......is [you are] loyal to his majesty, with absolute unwavering heart?" Faintly speaking with leisure, Gui Wan's eyes reflecting his figure of pure white.

"Yes." With not the slightest of hesitation, Lin Rui En answers, "Madam, I know you are in a difficult positon, but you certainly hold influences on both Prime Minister Lou and his majesty, I hope that for all the officials, regardless of rank, within the Capital, for the people living in the borderlands, Madam will take careful consideration, to slow down this battle. This Lin does not wish, that one day, I will have to point my sword at Prime Minister Lou, at Madam."

These words, he originally would never have spoken of in this lifetime, but the death of Ran Yi, has clearly declared the future prospects of the imperial court, a vast scene of bloodiness. Looking at this scene of early autumn, he could not help but to nobly decide, to be able to pledge loyalty for the lord of tomorrow is one of his lifetime aspiration, he has once guarded the frontier when he was younger, and has also developed deep feelings towards the people of there, towards this land he has gained a sense of honour and disgrace as well as duty, seeing the dispute in imperial court grow increasingly fierce, he is also faced with choices, although the current Emperor cannot be considered a brilliant ruler, but the word loyalty is something he definitely cannot abandon, this is the steeled bones he has as someone of the Lin military family. Scholars cannot have no integrity, soldiers cannot have no righteousness.

Rounded eyes staring at Lin Rui En, Gui Wan can sense the sudden suffocating

atmosphere, the tone of these words is clearly telling her to persuade Lou Che to give up on power, lips forming a bitter smile, Lou Che's intentions is already resolute, who is able to shake him? With power in hand, how is one able to easily give it up? What exactly should she do?

Under the rather brilliantly shinning sun, showering onto Lin Rui En, whose shadow greatly expands, Gui Wan half lowers her eyes, avoiding the light, opening it a moment later, her eyes contains a scene of brilliant clearness.

"General, please give me a year, if I am unable to resolve this situation of deadlock, then a year later, I shall flee to a place faraway from here, leaving this contentious land."

Seeming to have not expected her to speak words of such ambition, Lin Rui En is clearly stunned, his face somewhat eased, but also carries slight worry.

Ending the conversation, Gui Wan nods her head, saying a word of goodbye, she leaves the chrysanthemum courtyard and heads out.

"Madam....." A sound of quiet calling once again stops her, this tone seems a lot softer than before, all of a sudden she did not know whether to turn back or not.

"If Madam is met with any difficulties at all, this Lin is still the person who picked up the handkerchief for you."

The view of plum blossoms seemingly sparse, the drifting fragrance dejected, he was willing to bow down and pick up her handkerchief......this scene, this circumstance, not once has she forgotten.....

[1] Vigorous momentum like a rainbow or qì shì rú hóng / 气势如虹 – means that their vigorous spirits and strong momentum seems to be able to charge across a long rainbow.

I actually quite like how Lou Che steeled his resolution to get Gui Wan out of there, just that it had to come at the cost of Ran Yi's life Poor General and Lou Sheng needs all the hugs they can get T_T

Full

First of all thank you for all the comments, and I am sorry I haven't been replying to them as I am getting really busy with uni lately, and I probably won't have the time to be replying to everyone's comments for a while. But! I assure you all that I do read your comments, and I thoroughly enjoy hearing everyone's thoughts on the chapters so that we can share all these mix of emotions together haha

After the love story of Lou Sheng and Ran Yi came to a heartbreaking end in the last chapter, the focus is brought back to the main couple here. Whether you like him or hate him, Lou Che is the only one Gui Wan loves, and the majority of this chapter is dedicated in giving them some bonding time.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Drifting Fragrance Secretly Takes Action

Gui Wan steps into the Prime Minister Estate courtyard, body seeming to still carry the scent of incense from the mourning hall, faintly clinging to her body, distracting her heart into regularly rising and falling, constantly flashing fragments of the encounters within the Lin Estate. Raising her bowed head, she finds a little plainly dressed servant standing in front of the study, a green glazed bowl of lotus design on the tray she holds, face showing hesitance, anxiously at unease.

"Madam, Lord Prime Minister he....." The maid upon seeing Gui Wan approaching, releases a sigh of relief, Prime Minister Lou does not like others disturbing him, she has softly called out a few times from the doors, but not a single reply has come from inside, she dares not to rashly enter, nor does she dare to casually leave, currently stuck in this situation difficult to advance or retreat.

"I got it." Seeing the cause, Gui Wan gently waves her hand, signalling the maid to withdraw, taking the tray from her hands, one hand pushing open the unlatched doors of the study, a smile slowly rippling out, lips just about to call out, when she notices the entire room shrouded in quiet.

Lou Che lays above some documents, seeming to have sunken deep into sweet dreams, the windows half opened, a sky of cloudless blue, the book scrolls on the desk half messed up, a slight breeze occasionally brushing past, sheets of paper lightly flutters, but the person on the desk does not sense this at all.

Gui Wan lightens her footsteps, slowly walking in front of the desk, Lou Che is indeed sleeping, unrestrained handsomeness of elegant nobility, within the jade-like appearance there exhibits clearness, she gently places down the tray in hand, picking up a white jade paperweight, pressing down the sheets of paper, flicking away the dusts on the bamboo scrolls. Looking elsewhere, from the side of her eyes, she catches glimpse of him still frowning whilst in his dreams, quietly without hesitation, her hands brushes his face, fingers gently stroking past the middle of his brows, helping him to smooth out this hint of worry revealed on the outside.

Just how tired he is......

Within three days of returning to the estate, after one day of pulling an allnighter with Lou Sheng, he spends two days discussing matters with Prince of
Nan Jun, Prince Duan, usually only seeing him containing a smile of spring
breeze, who knew that under the spring breeze, it is this wounding like being
shredded. She often laments, Lou Che is the same type of person as herself,
flawless on the outside, smooth and slick in dealing with all sorts of situations.
Only now does she know, to her, this could perhaps also be of natural character;
but to him, it is the ability to survive.

Fingers delicately brushing over his brows, straightening out the unorganised black strands on the sides, catching a glimpse of the dark circles under his eyes caused by fatigue, Gui Wan's heart lightly clenches, nose actually feeling slightly sour. Turning her head to the side, she finds a set of fur clothing on the back of the chair, laying it over Lou Che's shoulders, she carefully covers every little gap where air can leak in, about to withdraw her hand, with just a single move, the person in deep sleep has his hand suddenly jumping out from under the clothing, grabbing onto her, lashes fluttering half open, those quietly dark eyes gazing at her with a smile, deep affection flowing out from within.

"Gui Wan....." This sound of calling is not like usual, is a gentle breeze blowing ripples across a pond of spring water, carrying three points of intoxicated tone as it blows into the heart, the voice with slight ambiguity seeming to reveal a trace of satisfaction, laced around.

Looking at him absentmindedly, Gui Wan felt as though something was stuck in her throat, unable to sound half a word in reply, half mystified half intoxicated, her tender heart endlessly spinning, chaotically causing her thoughts to suddenly stop working, completely blank.

"If you continue looking at me like that, I may not be able to resist anymore." Loudly sighing, Lou Che sits up straight, placing the half fallen clothing on his shoulders back in its original spot, seeing Gui Wan still appear blanked out as though her soul has flew away, he hook in her waist, bring her into his arms, affectionately sitting her on his thighs.

"Husband." Leaning against his chest, she buries her face into his embrace, softly saying in a seeming coquettish manner.

"En?"

"What did you dream about just now?" Why were you frowning?

Lou Che wraps his arm around her shoulder, his breathing accompanied by a faint touch of fragrance, surprised by her words, dream? How long has he not had a dream for? Just now because of exhaustion, he had a light nap for a little while, from the very moment she stepped into the room, he had already woken up, just that he was unwilling to clear his head in awakening, greedily hating to leave this moment of her outpouring tenderness. He did not dream, but she, has

become his dream.

"I dreamt of you."

"Dreamt of me? Then why were you still frowning?" Light anger laced with dissatisfaction, Gui Wan reaches out to gently twist his ear, followed by a soft sound of laughter, "I heard, women of the common people would discipline their husbands like this."

Ear heating up, sensing faint pain, Lou Che looks at her angry state, with a seeming smile, "If this is how they discipline, it is indeed not bad." Before he finished his words, Gui Wan's hand exerts even more strength, Lou Che softly sounds a cry, attracting bursts of laughter from her.

"Husband," Before the laughing stopped, she appears to carelessly mentions, "It'll be nice if, we were really a couple of the common people."

The country, imperial court, melted away with a smile, right and wrong, bent roads and straight roads, grace and hate, love and revenge, completely left behind, a bland attitude of life, wilfully contempt.

"Viewing the hundreds of loudly contending mountain streams in spring, thousands of mountain peaks emerald green; appreciating rising mist and falling clouds in summer, blooming flowers and lush green trees; touring the mountains flooded with red leaves in autumn, flowers falls and fruit buds; viewing the dancing snow in cold winter, bending tree branches of white jade," Finger gently twiddling with Lou Che's collar, Gui Wan earnestly induces, "Such a life, would it not be a pleasure?"

Smile slightly fading, Lou Che half squints his eyes, hand exerting more strength, tightly holding the person in his embrace, "If you truly like it, when I have the spare time in future, I will accompany you in sightseeing."

Gui Wan slightly raises her head, meeting her eyes is the soft lining of his jaw, further up, she still cannot see the look in his eyes, unable to suppress herself, little bits of disappointment surfaces in her heart, "When would Husband have the spare time?"

Not expecting that she would say such a phrase carrying hidden bitterness, carefully thinking over it, Lou Che bursts out laughing, lowering his head to place

a kiss on Gui Wan's forehead, "After a period of time, once the situation calms down, how's that?" When lowering his head, he sees Gui Wan pout her lips, not a very happy appearance, an enchanting charm contained within such tenderness, plucking at his heartstrings, eyes darkening, his eyes staring solely at her, practically falling into a daze.

Since when did he discover she makes these little actions? Usually always having a faint smile fixed on her face, only when her mood relaxes, would discontent be shown with light pouting, become absentminded when sunken into deep thoughts, deliberately smiling even sweeter when angry......these fleeting moments of outpouring demeanour, since when was he able to capture them? Perhaps Gui Wan herself has never realised, these little actions, she would only reveal when alone with him, how many times, for these little actions of hers, does he gushes with affection, frequently losing his soul.

Hand lifting a small gathering of her silky smooth hair, bringing it to his lips as he lightly kisses them, sweet fragrance coating it, seeping into his heart, his heart because of this, freezes.

"Could it be that Husband has never thought to....." Gui Wan leans against the front of his lapel, "Give up on catalysing events, spending each day like an idle cloud, wild crane^[1]?"

Gathering away his smile and knitting his brows, Lou Che holds back his expression, picking out Gui Wan's intentions from those words, his heart feeling extremely uncomfortable, eyes sinking, lips seal without answering.

Noticing his strange behaviour, Gui Wan secretly sighs to herself, waiting and waiting, in the end he does not speak, turning her head, she takes back her hair from his palm, and then gets up. Lou Che's heart palpitates, his palm already empty, under the regret of sensing loss, he immediately grabs her, hand tightly circling her wrist, forcefully confining her reckless movements.

Really is getting more and more useless.....Lou Che helplessly laughs, his mood controlled by her every move, with the passing of time, his resistance also increasingly weakens, just like the five months in Nan Jun, that biting feeling of great worry preventing him from being able to live his life as usual, several times did he impulsively wanted to rush back to the Capital City, if not for Prince of

Nan Jun and Prince Duan holding him back, he would have already made a huge mistake in his political career, now that she is in his embrace, how could he possibly let her leave? That gut wrenchingly unforgettable longing, he is unwilling to experience again, not letting go, he definitely cannot let go.

His originally resolute thoughts has been disrupted by her, balance of rationality has also tilted towards his emotional feelings, he speaks up: "Gui Wan, don't move, listen to me." The soft jade, warm and fragrant in his embrace, Lou Che gently leans his head onto Gui Wan's collar area, looking at her beautifully delicate neck from the corner of his eyes.

"Could it be you don't want to have a little listen of my background?"

Suddenly turning her eyes, but finds that she cannot see anything in particular, Gui Wan silently remains motionless, softly sounding a vague reply.

".....I'm an orphan, my late father was originally a low rank official aiding the Crown Prince, passing away during my childhood years, my mother also followed him not long after, I spent a total of ten years staying in the Crown Prince Estate, then took the first place title in one swoop, rising high into the golden road....."

Gui Wan froze for a long moment, the voice reaching her ears is calm, as though speaking of an unrelated matter, why is it that her heart is pained as she listens to it? Originally thinking he is from a noble family, up until this very moment, did she find how far from the truth this is, ten years' time summarised in one sentence, she dares not to imagine how a child with no support no dependence, can live his life in the Crown Prince Estate, rich with intrigues. Ten years, struggling in face of adversity, another ten years, rising and falling in officialdom, twenty years, in exchange for today's power, this kind of unwilling, this kind of reluctance.

That's why, power, position, wealth.....once picked up, difficult to put down.

Calmly telling her his background story with just a few simple sentences, Lou Che smiles as he looks at her, saying word by word: "I have sworn, to stand above millions of people, even if it is just one person standing below, I will still make him helpless against me, do you understand?"

His gentle explanation did not relieve Gui Wan's heart from the heavy burden, and instead lightly shocks her, daring not to believe this, she firmly locks her gaze

onto him. refined and cultured, gentle and elegant, her husband in a body of long moon white robe, warmth flowing out from that clear look of handsomeness, clearly an admirable and unrestrained fine gentleman, but inside those deep bottomless eyes, there is a something called "ambition" writhing inside, that is why he overturns his hand to form clouds, cover his hand to form rain, neither urgently nor slowly striving forth against the Emperor and the imperial court, whilst playing with political trickery, he is deeply intoxicated by the charm of power.

His entire life, accompanied by one word — "power".

Heart feeling more and more pained, Gui Wan frowns, a sense of sourness surging up her body, after thinking for a moment, she lightly asks, her tone somewhat off: "What about Consort Ying?" This is originally a thorn stuck in her heart, a thorn that she has strongly neglected, but would occasionally let it break through. Never has she been as confused as this before, that woman who is no less than her regardless of any aspects, she has faced with no measures at all for the first time in her life. Actually unable to hold back anymore today, she wishes to ask for certainties. Her heart, is it disturbed?

Lou Che firstly did not say anything, then openly laughs, laughing more and more heartily, laughing to the point Gui Wan's face showed awkwardness, yet he seems to be enjoying it, refusing to miss any of her expressions.

She finally spoke up, is she starting to mind it now? Thinking this, Lou Che sincerely feels ascertained and put to ease, recalling two years ago, when he first met her, and got married, just how carefree and wilful she was, practically making him think she is a deity who wrongly descended to the mortal realm. How many times of doubts and wonder he felt, slowly observing her without leaving a trace, even before he himself came to the realisation, he had already started to move his focus onto her, knowing what she loves to eat most, what accessories she likes, what she usually do, all of this, bit by bit, seeping into his heart, him holding up every little thing she loves most in front of her, originally carried the mentality of compensation, later it actually changed in essence......

Finding that he had already fallen in love with her, and she, is actually still hesitating, even rejecting it, how uncertain and uneasy he felt. So he courted her, pampered her, cherished her like a priceless treasure.

He exhausted all mental efforts, for her to fall in love with him, giving her the best the world has to offer, making her grow accustomed to his love, unable to get rid of it.

He wants to lure her into sinking deep with him.....

Laughter gradually fading, his dark eyes appears intoxicated, charmingly asking lowly: "Gui Wan, do you mind it?"

Does she mind it?

In Gui Wan's heart, this question has been asked, laughed at, sighed at, but never reached an answer, in this moment, she slightly regrets the words she has blurted out just before, like a piece of pierced sandpaper, traces of her heart being revealed bare, with nowhere to hide.

Arm wrapping around Gui Wan's shoulder, looking into both her eyes overflowing with a look of difficulty, Lou Che elegantly smiles, raising his hand to hold the back of her neck, gently touching her cherry lips, the sometimes faint sometimes clear fragrance disrupting his willpower, the instant the two lips came in contact, a tingling feeling like electric currents, and temptation like sweet mellowness, bewitched, the entanglement between the pair of lips making him drunk on her soft and moist sweetness, sinking deep into it, longing for more.

Seeing him close in, she blinks her eyes, actually showing no response, losing herself within his seemingly gentle yet dominant pursuit, breathing pattern gradually weakening, even the thinnest of air has been claimed by him, lightly closing her eyes, sensing the charming and gentle breathing that can be heard at a very close distance, accompanied by lusciously sweet torture, finally just when she was about to completely lose her breath, he lightly lets go of her, tongue licking her red lips, lips continuously, lingeringly rubbing against her upper lip and philtrum area, half captivated half relishing.

"Although unable to personally hear you say you mind, I am already greatly satisfied." Lou Che lowers his voice a little, a trace of constraint carried within his hoarse voice, tidal feelings on the roll.

Hearing this, Gui Wan faintly smiles like the wind, taking the initiative to nestle against him, just when their lips were about to connect again, she lightly turns

her head, the moment his lips grazes past, her breathing pauses, carrying the dark charm of seduction, deliberately not allowing to actually come in contact, sweetly smiling, she urges: "Husband still not answering me?"

The look in his eyes flashing bright, settling on her brows like flowing waves, her stunning face enchantingly beautiful like flowers, hand exerting great strength, clutches onto her body, fiercely sealing her lips, carrying slight drunken wilfulness of steaming hotness, he goes through another round of entanglement, and only then was he willing to let her go with satisfaction, seeing her brows and eyes appear more focused and deep, practically making one sink into those bottomlessly charming eyes.

Adjusting his shortness of breath, he once again speaks up.

".....first time seeing Yao Ying was in the Crown Prince Estate, at the time I had just been titled First Ranked Scholar....." First time honestly telling Gui Wan of his past without any reservations, deep inside he actually senses relief. She is his wife, is originally the one to share everything with him, whilst narrating his past, he suddenly felt an impulse, wanting to ask her, my wedded wife, may we join hands and grow old together?

Like dream.....

Like intoxication.....

Events of half his life, spoken in one go, words are shallow, meaning is deep, do you understand my heart?

.....

"His majesty made an imperial decree on the day you went to Hong Fu Temple to worship the Buddha?" Hearing up to here, Gui Wan could not refrain from interrupting, asking in surprise, Zheng Liu is as cunning as such, taking advantage of when they have left, to set an imperial decree, announcing it to the world, one phrase of the monarch's words is not to be taken as a joke, how many people's futures did it change? Remembering the first meeting in Hong Fu Temple that day, could it be that that was the true start of entangling fates?

Heart inexplicably gaining an additional trace of unease, Gui Wan's deep gaze enters Lou Che's eyes, "Husband, that day, what stick did Lady Consort Ying

draw?"

Brows twitching, Lou Che recalls for a moment, saying: "The Emperor Swallow."

Practically about to exclaim aloud, Gui Wan suppresses her rapidly beating heart, despite this, her face also makes a sudden change, cold sweat oozing.

"Gui Wan?" Sensing the discomfort of the person in his arms, Lou Che heart achingly holds her tightly, slowly stroking her back, "What's wrong?"

No answer, Gui Wan stretches her arms and circles Lou Che's neck, affectionately sticking closely to him, after leaving time to quietly slip by, her melodic voice sounds: "Husband, if starting from this moment, you aid his majesty in pushing the reforming of the central academy, discouraging Prince Duan and Prince of Nan Jun, bit by bit slowly letting go of power, even if his majesty envies you, he cannot do anything. After three to five years, we relocate to Luo Ling, Nan Jun is really close to there, under Prince of Nan Jun's care, but is not within Nan Jun territory, with his majesty's pride, he too cannot afford to lay his hands there. With this, ten years later, everything will be able to be as calm as ever. Husband, what do you say?"

Lou Che does not respond, gesture still gentle, but the air is like complete silence, neither warm nor cold. Gui Wan secretly sighs, voice making a change, leisurely, lightly saying: "Does Husband by chance know, within nearly two years of marriage, what I hated most?"

A light shock to the heart, Lou Che lowers his head, cheek plastered against cheek, a soft and delicate touch, intimately rubbing against one another, intoxicated in yet another flirtatious expression, "What is it?"

"I hated the back view you left me most," Gui Wan melodically laughs, "Every time it was always you leaving me behind....."

Not giving Lou Che any rebuttal opportunity, "That is why, from now on I will not wait for you to turn your back on me in leave again, before that, I will abandon you first......" She smiles again, eyebrows also smiling, eyes also smiling, lips also smiling, only her heart alone is blank without the slightest of feelings.

A sharp look passes by his eyes, Lou Che abruptly looks at her with heavy

feelings, a slight desire to express rage, but could not bear to, the doubts in his heart weighing heavily, not understanding why her words today is always leading to the words "let go of power", especially after hearing "The Emperor Swallow", seeming to have the means of forcing him into making a choice.

He cannot choose, nor does he want to choose, this is his path, to call upon wind and rain in the imperial court, grasping hold of all events in the world, become the number one minister in the world.

The value of power, before one gets a taste of it, one would not know the true taste, but after getting a taste of it, the arrogance of the world's honourability, the pride of everyone bowing their heads, wanting to give it up, how could it not be difficult?

"No," Gritting his teeth as he spits out word by word, "Cannot let go, be it you, be it the world....."

Slightly surprised for a moment, Gui Wan relaxes herself, still leaning against Lou Che with infinite intimacy, seeming to speak out of interest: "Husband, that day, do you know what stick I had drawn in Hong Fu Temple?" Sensing that Lou Che is showing no trace of unusualness, secretly sensing his calm, she reaches out to hold his hand, touching the hand which was slightly cool. She seemingly bitterly seemingly sweetly smiles, this man, in the end he is still somewhat nervous, is it because he had already guessed it?

Is it destiny, or is it hand in hand till old age?

"Also The Emperor Swallow, Husband."

"Your majesty....." De Yu is respectfully looks towards that hesitant figure, softly calling out.

Casually glancing back at the still very young eunuch, Zheng Liu reveals a trace of a practically undetectable smile, stepping into Jing Ye. Inside the palace is currently a few palace maids and eunuchs lazily, leisurely cleaning the entire courtyard, seeing the arriving person, under great surprise, hurriedly kneel down, bowing their head, not daring to slack off.

Seeing the monarch of yesterday and tomorrow's expression, everyone's

hearts held doubts, they say that the currently most doted Lady Consort Yin is presently in child labour, the Emperor instead of waiting in Wen Bin Palace, why come all the way to this long deserted Jing Ye? Could it be that the rumours of the Emperor still hung up on his love for the missing Consort Ying is true? Or is it the other rumour, the Emperor has once hidden a stunning woman in this palace before? These rumours circulating in the imperial palace seems real and fake all the same, everyone only dares to secretly weigh up the rumours to their own observations, quietly speculating the results, in order to relieve the loneliness within the palace, to see the Emperor at this very moment, it is inevitable for the palace servants' doubts to snowball even larger.

Zheng Liu casually waves his hand, "All leave." Not even giving the bowed heads of the palace servants a single glance, he alone goes ahead and walks inside the palace. Arriving at the doors of the main hall, he raises his head, looking up at the plaque with the two words "Yin Yue" (Hidden Moon) beautifully, delicately written on it, seeming to be in deep thoughts, knitting his brows without saying a word.

De Yu has always been following behind from around three meters of distance, seeing Zheng Liu's expression, secretly shivers, and speaks up again: "Your majesty, Lady Consort Yin's side has already been urging several times, saying Lady Consort's childbirth is not going smoothly......your majesty, do you want to....."

As though De Yu's words did not reach his ears, Zheng Liu does not even turn his head back as he asks: "Say, is this Yin Yue Hall a bit too empty?"

".....yes." Suddenly being asked like that, De Yu froze for a moment, blurting out a reply, and immediately shuts up, also looking up to that plaque, heart secretly tumbling, thoughtfully observing Zheng Liu's back view, what exactly is the Emperor thinking of right now? Yin Yue? Could it be.....?

Brows creasing, from deep down in his heart, he wishes not for the Emperor to stay here for too long, having just mentioned the current huge matter, yet Zheng Liu still does not seem to be feeling pained nor itching, De Yu has no idea to throw out, heart desperate like fire. He has once seen the Emperor's cold side, heart heavily palpitating, having fought through this many years in the palace,

his only great strength is "outlook", although not completely obvious, but he feels that the Emperor seems to hold different kind of feelings towards Madam Lou. Hardening his heart, he was just about to speak up in cutting off Zheng Liu reveries, when a burst of chaotically fast running comes breaking into Jing Ye.

"Your Majesty.....Lady Consort.....Lady Consort Yin.....gave birth to a dragon son....." Running as he shouts out this good news that rouses one's heart, the little eunuch hurriedly runs to the front of the Emperor and De Yu, having just come to a stop, he raises his head, looking at the Emperor's gentle and refined smile, but does not see any particular joy, as though passing by his ears is just a very typical matter. The little eunuch gulps, hesitating whether he should repeat the good news, his eyes turning to the currently most held high Head Eunuch De Yu, who knew he also appears distracted, thinking about something.

"Zheng Yue."

De Yu and the little eunuch meet eyes in puzzlement, not understanding. Zheng Liu once again adds: "The Prince shall be named 'Yue (栎)'."

Shocked, De Yu looks towards the Emperor, "月" and "栎", hopefully it is not he who is overthinking, why is it that when he heard this name, his heart jumped, immediately thinking of the woman who was once confined here. (The character 栎 has two different pronunciations, it is more often pronounced as lì but can also be pronounced as yuè which sounds exactly the same as moon in Chinese 月, as this is only written text, I guess the prince's name can be read either way but it seems to make more sense to use Yue in the translation)

The little eunuch immediately kneels down on the ground, saying phrase after phrase of your majesty is ingenious, fortune coming in trillions, heaven bless our country and so on, Zheng Liu simply maintains a faint smile hanging from start to finish, declining to comment, De Yu quietly stands at the side, hundreds of feelings mixing together, mood weighing heavy.

Having spoken many words of praises, the little eunuch who finally got a little tired suddenly stands up, gathering away his happily grinning face, quietly withdrawing to the side, not saying a word. It is at this moment that Zheng Liu finally turns around, his line of sight shifting between De Yu and the little eunuch, saying: "Go to the General Estate, tell General Lin, the heavens blessed

Qi Ling, a dragon son brought to the world, transfer the soldiers from the northern borders to the Capital to celebrate the joyous event, the whole world (nation) is to join in the jubilation."

Hearing this, the little eunuch immediately accepts the order, a trail of smoke following behind as he runs ahead, actually running faster than when he was coming here.

Watching him run further and further away, an ominous feeling weighs heavy on De Yu's heart, why is that when he heard the order just now, it was like the Emperor's intent is to mobilise military defence, the more he thinks the chillier it gets, the weight on his heart suddenly grows a lot heavier.

"It is indeed too desolate here," Seemingly speaking to himself, Zheng Liu says this, turning back to intentionally or unintentionally glance at De Yu, "Still lacking a female owner, do you think so?"

Being glanced at by the passing of his cold eyes, De Yu hurriedly bows his head, daring not to answer, leaving him to linger outside Yin Yue Hall, occasionally asking strange questions, but is mostly self-questioning self-answering.

"General," The literary man stands beside the crescent doorway, watching the man performing a sword dance in the courtyard, "Orders have already been passed on just now, not needing much time, the Lin army up north would be reaching the Capital City, in addition to the imperial troops originally responsible for guarding the Capital, his majesty no longer needs to worry."

No one responds inside the courtyard, only the sound of rustling wind, a clear shadow pointing in all directions, a figure as powerful as a flying dragon leaping up, the sharp sword in hand horizontally slicing to the side, sharp and cold like a star, piercing through the air, with the mighty force of a thousand soldiers, ten thousand horses, such that is breaking rocks, shaking the earth. Wrist making a sudden turn, the sword softly draw circles, exquisitely subtle movements without a break, sometimes like an golden hook hanging upside down, also like the wings of a wild goose soaring, the sword freely sways effortlessly, with firmness and flexibility, sharp light sparkling.

A silver light suddenly sweeping past, the sound of breaking wind rapidly rising, whipping wind causing a stinging sensation, with a blink of the literary man's eyes, the flash of silver blade turned out to be charging right at him, heart greatly taken aback, before he could even emit a sound, the tip of the blade was already at his throat.

"General?" With the tip of the chilling blade at less than half an inch of distance from his throat, the moment he raises his eyes, meeting Lin Rui En's eyes colder than that of the blade, in that moment he felt as though he has fallen into an ice cave, the scholar blurts out a word of General, tone trembling.

Rapidly sweeping past the scholar's face, Lin Rui En's face remains emotionless, with a light turn of the wrist, a silver light of the blade flashes, the scholar only felt as though his eyes were blinded for moment, chilling air plummeting, before he could catch a clear view of this very action, the sword had already returned to his sheath, his hung up heart finally put down at ease, secretly letting out a sigh of relief.

"When was the order passed?" A tone of indifference, each word seeming to hold not an ounce of warmth as it comes out of Lin Rui En's mouth.

The literary man freezes, and then remembers the reporting matter just now, looking up to Lin Rui En, seeming to sense him writhing in anger, that type of suppressed emotions of intensity lending the power of the sword to swing it all out.

"Not long after Consort Yin gave birth to the dragon child this morning....."

"I'm asking you when was the order passed to the northern troops?" Harshly cutting off his words, Lin Rui En reveals his impatience and a bit of unrestrainable anger.

The literary man does not speak after, having received secret orders from within the palace this morning, he immediately passed the order to the northern troops, all was single-handedly done by him, could it be that General is chasing after this responsibility? The corner of his lips pulling up, hooking up a seeming smile, he could not help but to let out a long sigh. A situation like this has never happened before, passing on orders in place of the General, there is nothing wrong with it afterwards, and this seems to be the first time General has clearly

displayed his dissatisfaction.

Why? The face like that of a hibiscus flower suddenly flashes past his mind, it is because of her right, that Madam Lou who holds moon-like elegance? Only this reason would be able to explain General's abnormal behaviour. The situation within the Capital is very clear right now, the Emperor's court holds different shares of factions with the joint forces of Prime Minister Lou, Prince Duan, Prince of Nan Jun, officials of all rankings within the imperial court have made their stances clear, the two sides in deadlock; the Emperor using the birth of the dragon child to transfer troops into the Capital, holds no other intention but to solve the current situation of deadlock, forcing back Prime Minister Lou alike, and the deeper meaning behind all this, more or less involves that woman.

Truly a source of disaster......since the very first meeting, it just gave him an ominous feeling, watching this young general who he has taught since young, bit by bit starting to grow sincere feelings, balance tilting towards emotions, even affecting his rational decisions. The literary man loudly shouts "no" in his heart, Lin Rui En is the disciple he has meticulously cultivated, is the pillars of talent that he spent half his lifetime teaching, how could he ruin himself in the hands of one woman like this? The one he cultivated, should be a tiger warrior commanding the winds and clouds, to be recorded down in history in future, and not like the current discouraged hero immersed in love affairs.

"General, imperial orders cannot be violated, this subordinate has merely obeyed orders."

Ice cold eyes looking at him, Lin Rui En tightly grips onto the sword in hand, pressing his lips together as the chilly look in his eyes grows deeper and deeper, spinning in complexity, after a long time it gradually fades, drawing out his sword from the sheath, the light of the blade blinding, he once again puts it back, all expression hidden away, only indifference remains, "Since that is so, then carry out the orders then."

"General," Calling out to Lin Rui En's leaving figure, the scholar seems slightly angered, "Does General knows what is for public affairs, what is for personal affairs?"

Lin Rui En stops in his steps, but does not turn around, standing within the

courtyard.

"If General is giving up on greater justice for a bit of personal feelings, it will definitely be a disgrace for future generations, obsessing with something that does not belong to oneself, in the end it is just emptily grasping onto the flower in the mirror, the moon in the water, hope that General is able to rein in the horse from the edge of the cliff in time."

Without looking back, Lin Rui En tightly knits his brows together, the teaching he has grown accustomed to since young, entering his ears in this moment is like a needle stabbing into him, the words flower in the mirror, moon in the water is even more startling by each word, feet no longer rooted to the ground, he immediately strides forth, the literary man remains behind, sincere feelings beyond words, only he knows, the feelings of friends and mentor-student between the two, in this silent turn of the back moment, has faded......

Deep night, Prime Minister Estate.

Moon bright, stars scattered, night cool like water.

Beyond the veiled curtains, the splendour of spring limitless, occasional shallow breathing, occasional rain of loving words, as though hidden as though revealed, suddenly bright suddenly dark, such seduction charming to the point that even the moon seems to be a few points dimmer, sinking into the darkness.

"Gui Wan....." Breathing mixing with vague words.

With a gentle turn of the body, clothing slipping down, skin that defeats frost and triumphs snow revealing brilliance of dripping jade under this enchanting night, caught in Lou Che's eyes, naturally difficult to resist. Laying over the body, kissing onto her back, hand reaching into the thin layer of clothing, fondling her exquisitely tender body.

"Mm....." A sound of bird-like mewling, Gui Wan mistily opens her closed eyes, intoxication still evident in those orbs revealing slight helplessness, extending a jade arm, pulling at Lou Che's reprehensible hand, she turns her body around, leaning against his chest, softly calling out: "Husband....."

A sweet tone carrying a coquettish manner, Lou Che's heart felt tipsy, stroking

her hair, seeing her half-closed eyes, he knew she is tired. A night like this, her beautiful soul like a gnawing charm has made him sink in again, up till this moment, he also knows she cannot go through clouds and rain and again (making love), he sounds a melodic laughter, holding her in his arms, finding a comfortable position to sleep with her.

These past two months, his wife has took to great pains to dilute his ambitions, always luring him in in a push and pull manner, making him have no time to attend to other matters, only able to accompany her in the Prime Minister Estate. Back then he always laughed at others who indulged in beauty, only now is he beginning to know "Beauty Trap" is this powerful, causing him to be wholeheartedly willing to be trapped within.

Cuddling Gui Wan, he was inexplicably satisfied, soothing the unease in his heart that persistently lingers. Recalling that day, the moment Gui Wan blurted out "The Emperor Swallow" it was like a thorn had been stuck in his heart. Since childhood he has never believed "all matters boils down to fate", but concerning Gui Wan, he has also become mindful of personal gains and losses.

The Emperor Swallow and the crazy woman's prophecy, seems to be vaguely hinting at something.....

"Fate......" A seemingly mocking low laugher, looking at Gui Wan's sleeping face, he lowers his head and kisses her lips, in a situation of not wanting to startle her awake, he just lightly touches the surface, "That cannot do......you are my wife, even if that is your fate, I will ruin it."

Deep night, only he devilishly whispers within this silent air with no one answering.

"Do not believe in fate, there is no fate in this world......if there is, I will make it become none existent, Gui Wan, if anyone wants to snatch you away, I will definitely destroy them."

In this moment deep into the night, without any warning, an elderly voice sounds from outside the doors, "Lord Prime Minister, Prince Duan, Prince of Nan Jun are waiting in the main hall, says there are matters to discuss." Deliberately lowering his voice, afraid to annoy those inside.

They came? Lip buttering up a calculating smile, Lou Che carefully holds up the person in his arms, gently withdrawing his arm, and tenderly covering her with the thin quilt, smoothing out her scattered hair whilst he was at it, and only then did he get up from the bed. Whilst dressing himself, he watches that delicate figure, absolutely reluctant to leave, it took a long while before he quietly opens the doors, slowly stepping outside.

The old housekeeper dutifully waits outside the room, seeing Lou Che come out, he hurries forward, just about to speak up, but was silenced by the sharp look in Lou Che's eyes, until the two walk far into the courtyard, did Lou Che motion for him to speak.

"Prince Duan and Prince of Nan Jun has only just arrived, I said Lord Prime Minister has already retired for the night, but they insisted that there are urgent matters, so....."

Lou Che's one wave of his hand stops him from speaking further, the smile on his lips deepening, looks like they already received the news, the Emperor cannot refrain any longer and is to take action now.....heart filled with traces of excitement, he raises his head to the sky.

The moonlight alone is good, elegantly bleak.

[1] Spending each day like an **idle cloud, wild crane** or **xián yún yě hè /** 闲云野鹤 means **to live a recluse and unconstrained life.**

Part 1



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Raising The Water (Part One)

Lashes like fans gently flutters, eyes slowly opening, a pair of exceptionally bright orbs illuminating within the darkness, Gui Wan holds her body up, grabbing the clothes on the bed frame, dressing herself in a leisurely manner, lifting the curtains, she gets out of bed. Pushing open the windows with a "zhi" sound, the moonlight pours down, such brilliance of pale lighting floods into the room, using the faint moonlight, she attends to herself in front of the dressing mirror, single-handedly taking the ribbon, very casually combing up a men's bun, tying it up with the ribbon, after a little self-grooming, she pushes open the doors.

With the autumn air already thickening, frosty chills mixes with the moonlight

as it seeps into one's heart, she follows the garden path, distantly gazing towards the lit up discussion chamber, heart slightly saddened. With a pause she arrives at the front courtyard, having just stepped inside, she sees eight guards on duty in front of the courtyard, vigilantly standing, faces expressionless. They too see Gui Wan at the same time, the two stood up front were somewhat dumbfounded, blankly staring not knowing what to do. Gui Wan coldly glances across them, eyes like a river in winter, the several people originally guards of the Prime Minister Estate, were instantly silenced, leaving Gui Wan to freely wander into the restricted area of the Prime Minister Estate alone.

The discussion chamber although brightly lit up, but is currently completely silent, the lighting inside shining out onto the courtyard where the winding path leads, vaguely carrying a few points of strangeness. Thinking all over the place, Gui Wan had already passed by the little path, arriving at the doors of the discussion chamber, making guesses with uncertain thoughts, she gently pushes the doors, without thinking the door would actually open with a sound, exposing a little gap. Gui Wan was slightly surprised, not expecting such restricted area for secret discussions would actually be this easy, complicatedly thinking over it again, she thinks about the number of guards that could be hiding around the courtyard, this act of closing the doors is pretty much pointless, such ajar door, can still make herself appear honest and righteous, with no ulterior motives.

Carefully treading into the hall, outside the hall is empty without a single person, candlelight brightly greeting the eyes, to Gui Wan who has treaded all the way here in darkness, it really is rather blinding. She observes her surroundings, slowly walking up to the doors of the inner hall, until she was just one step away from the doors, did she finally hear faint voices. The clear and gentle voice is Lou Che, the unruly and prideful voice should be Prince Duan, also a smooth and deep voice—could it be Prince of Nan Jun?

The few people discussing the recent big matters within the imperial court in seeming ridicule, some about elderly members relocating, some about the reforming movement, the three of them eloquent, just like great friends who have not met for years. Gui Wan is clearly aware, just a year ago, Lou Che and Prince Duan were still political opponents, to actually be sat together laughing and chatting right now, on one hand it comes down to the situation, on the

other hand it is also with the means of benefitting from this joint force. Looks like within officialdom, there are no permanent friends, nor are there permanent enemies, this phrase truly is not wrong at all.

Lips carrying a bitter smile, she suddenly hears Prince Duan burst into hearty laughter, one can even imagine the crazy state he is in from the doors. Ears not missing a single word as she listens to him say: "Prime Minister Lou, that star pupil of yours truly does take after you quite a bit ah, the means he takes to and style of doing things is no less than you, right now he is but a loyal dog of the Emperor, not only viciously biting me one, it looks like he also wants to bite back at you the teacher who graced him now."

During the Changes of Feng Shan incident a year ago, Guan Xiu Wen condemned Prince Duan who was originally able to free himself from the blame, and even caused him to have his official post terminated, his home raided with goods confiscated, at the time he could only hold back the fire inside of him, not expecting that having spent so many years freely roaming the world of officialdom, he would actually fall under the hands of a kid yet to rid of his air of naivety. And after that, Guan Xiu Wen had been incorporated into the Emperor's faction of close ministers, with vicious ruthlessness, sparing no consideration, he takes to any means possible, causing everyone within the imperial court to avoid him, no one had ever thought that the young First Ranked Scholar from back then, who was as clear as water would actually become this terrifying.

Officials often uses Lou Che as a comparison, Lou Che's methods can also be considered viciously ruthless, but likes to use his own power to rid of others; and Guan Xiu Wen is different, always blocking those before him, destroying all those in his path, regardless of friend or foe, sometimes it can even be said to be despicable. All of a sudden, all those within the imperial court are having difficulty in distinguishing the relations between these two people who are teacher and student in name, just that no one dares to speak of it outside, thus also lending a hand to Guan Xiu Wen's further intensifying cold-hearted artifices.

"Prince Duan is just being too modest, you should know that it was but you who strongly guided and supported him back then, thus giving rise to the situation we are facing today." Lou Che filled with smiles, ironically speaks.

Gui Wan stands outside the doors, heart jumping upon hearing this. listening

to their tones, Lou Che and Prince Duan may be allies, but between them is a matter of passing back and forth, with underlying means of ridiculing, it really is rather strange. But she is extremely quick witted, her mind rapidly thinking over it, and very quickly figures out the mystery within. The biggest tie between Prince Duan and Lou Che is Yao Ying. Right now, although the two people stands together on the same boat, but towards where Yao Ying's heart lies, inevitably, Prince Duan secretly minds it, that is why he would occasionally poke at Lou Che out of sourness.

The fortunate factor is that Prince of Nan Jun is also present today, occasionally making intercepting quips, thus keeping everything in control. The three of them once again starts discussing the huge matters within the imperial court, speaking of the Emperor secretly sending a message for Lin Rui En to dispatch troops down south into the Capital today, another scheme must be underway, all of them gathers away their playfulness, serious in facing this matter, the dreary atmosphere in the room suddenly tenses up.

Even Gui Wan who is standing by the doors could feel the time passing by very slowly, one slight pause bringing upon suffocating pressure. Listening to them discuss, finding out that the Emperor has the intentions to send troops, her heart suddenly bursts into panic, the Emperor and Lou Che's party, exactly till when will they stop competing? Lou Che unable to let go of his obsession to the end, the Emperor is also unwilling to stand alone, the dispute between them, could it be they really need to establish a winner and loser?

A sense of vastness in her heart spreads, Gui Wan freezes on the spot, recalling the betting deadline with the Emperor, recalling the long talk within the Lin Estate, recalling all sorts of happenings with Lou Che during all this time......in this moment, she is actually about to go crazy, she is never one to display her emotions on the outside, no matter how great of an emotion she is feeling, it will be deeply hidden inside, although having compassionate thoughts, she would never act upon it, only this matter of fighting for power, has gradually become her heart disease. The reasoning of a stable world Lin Rui En spoke of, she understands, the situation derived from Lou Che's background, she also understands; back then, that stick of "The Emperor Swallow" she drew before getting married, and all the subsequent fateful encounters, have all produced

ominous clouds deep within her heart, even the mentioning of imperial power would make her feel a trace of taboo.....she has the carefree and easy-going nature like that of the cloudless skies, but is also sentimentally attached to the happiness of ordinary people, in terms of loving feelings, she too inevitably has blind feelings, all of this entangled within the heart, one word of "chaos" really is insufficient to describe it all.

Always wanting to use tender affection to rub off Lou Che's ambitious heart, yet the effect is very minimal. Personally seeing the battle between factions of the imperial court grow increasingly fierce, her heart is hung up high unable to settle back down, she is very well aware, competing with imperial power, the final result would definitely be of tragedy, exactly how long the alliance between Lou Che and Prince of Nan Jun, Prince Duan would last is still unknown, one year? Five years? Ten years? Or even longer?

She is not doing this for the country, nor is she doing this for the people, it is just that her heart is pained, afraid that Lou Che taking to such great pains, only to be reaching for a moon reflected in the water, such a flashy chess game, leading to such an outcome, how is anyone able to accept this? Husband ah Husband, how should all this be put to an end?

An upsurge of emotions unstably rising and falling, hit with realisation, she hears the three people inside the room begin to discuss what countermeasures to makes, ideas thrown out left and right, seeming to have plans to transfer the southern troops into the Capital, in order to not alert the Emperor, they are also planning to split up the army, it is originally a usual thing to mobilise small numbers of soldiers for protection, if the southern troops are sent on the move in scattered numbers, number one it can avoid the eyes and ears of others, number two it can also eliminates the risk of arousing suspicions.

Listening to them have everything planned out^[1], not one of the strategies they came up with lacking in backup plans, both offensive and defensive, Gui Wan also secretly held great admiration. Suddenly hearing a strange sound that is practically almost inaudible from behind her, she jumps in surprise, looking back, she only sees a maid holding a tray, placed on it are three fire glazed cups of clear floral designs, seems to be a sort of ginseng soup supplement. The maid seems to also not expect someone to be here, mouth opening wide, looking at

Gui Wan in surprise.

Gui Wan suppresses the panic in her heart, placing a finger to her lips, this maid is also quite bright minded, shutting her mouth as she stands behind Gui Wan. At this moment, the inner room has also sunken into silence, seeming to discuss the current situation of deadlock, within the scene of silence there harbours the killing intent of blade lights and sword shadows.

"Dragging though mud and water like this, exactly how long will it continue, might as well move the southern troops into the Capital, I do not believe, obtaining the Capital, we still need to be afraid of him not giving in.....by that time, with titles, with positions, taking the....."

These words travelling into her ears, panic rising like sudden thunder hitting the ground, Gui Wan oozing in cold sweat. Not giving it much thought, she extends her arms and forcefully pushing the doors, a sound of "ga zhi", cutting off the outrageous remarks of the one inside. The three people inside were slightly stunned, filled with murderous intent they turn towards the doors, waiting to catch a clear view of the figure, one shocked, one doubtful, one surprised.

Late autumn dew thick, chilliness invading the body, waves of thin cold follows the opening of the discussion chamber's doors and rushes into the room, the three men by the table with high positions and great power simultaneously looks towards the outer area, Gui Wan had already taken the tray from the maid's hands, stepping into the room, a faint smile, a wisp of gentle breeze, eyes circling around, carefully looking around the room.

She already had familiarising encounters with Prince Duan, as for the one sat to the left of Prince Duan, middle aged, noble and dignified, fine facial hair above the lips, bringing out the charm of maturity, a burly figure, sharp eyes of an eagle, heroic spirit revealed within firmness, even when silent he still holds the air of a leader.

"Tonight really is lively, why is Madam Lou still not asleep?" Prince Duan laughingly greets Gui Wan who just entered.

One by one placing down the cups of soup in front of Prince of Nan Jun, Prince Duan, Lou Che, Gui Wan turns around, lightly sweeping a glance at Prince Duan,

"Your highness is working so hard, Gui Wan with kind regards, have come to send some midnight refreshments."

Hearty laughter coming from the mouth of Prince of Nan Jun: "Madam Lou truly is virtuous." Not knowing whether this is of praises or ridicule, Gui Wan smiles as she courteously performs a wan fu bow. (Wan fu bow 万福礼 – a greeting by women, whereby they fold their hands on the lower right side. A gesture that symbolises, wishing you happiness and good luck)

Prince of Nan Jun has kept his eyes locked onto her since the moment she stepped in, but seeing her fairy sleeves float at first glance, dimples like the spring peaches, just as the rumours have stated, a one in million peerless beauty, what is even more commendable is that sense of inexplicable elegant ease. Observing her for a while, he suddenly catches glimpse of Lou Che's state of displeasure, anger displayed between his brows; in this muted moment, he once again deeply gazes at Gui Wan, sure enough Lou Che's face darkens even more, Prince of Nan Jun hurriedly looks away, lowering his head to drink ginseng soup that is still a little hot, secretly sneaking a few laughs inside, didn't think Lou Che would actually expose such clear display of emotions, actually he is more than double the age of Madam Lou, not to mention he already has a beloved wife back home.

Lou Che holds Gui Wan's hand from across the table, feeling that it is a little chilly, he looks at Gui Wan with half blame half pity, Gui Wan holds his hand with a faint smile, "Drink it whilst it's hot."

Originally a room of surging undercurrents, the slyness of plotting, vanished without a trace amongst the warmth of the hot soup. Prince Duan who carried hidden malignant influences just before also lowers head, taking a drink of the hot soup, eyes circling between Lou Che and Gui Wan.

With the room falling into quiet, Gui Wan sees the three of them intently savouring the ginseng soup, obscured behind the smoke, also seeming to be in their own thoughts, staring with her beautiful eyes, her lips parts as she says: "Taking advantage of this spare time, I shall tell a story for your leisure."

Lou Che is slightly taken aback, Prince of Nan Jun and Prince Duan appears somewhat interested. Women talking during a dinner is originally an irregularity,

apart from a small number of honourable women who specially holds high positions, and these women's spoken topic during the dinner would even more be of utmost cautiousness. But right now Gui Wan is speaking so frankly, her attitude so natural, because of this all three of them were speechless, waiting for her to continue.

"Zhuang Zi spent an entire lifetime in a state of utter poverty, King Wei of Chu greatly admired his talents, sending an emissary to use a heavy sum of gold to make him become an official, he refused saying: 'I much prefer playing games and delighting myself in the filthy mud water, than to be willing to be bound by those in power, I am unwilling to be an official for as long as I live, allow my spirit to gain happiness.' Zhuang Zi's great friend Hui Shi on the other hand was unable to hold himself back from riches and honour, going to Wei to become the prime minister, Zhuang Zi wanted to go see him, when someone sowed discord saying to Hui Shi: 'Zhuang Zi wants to come replace you as prime minister.' Hui Shi in great panic, went searching for Zhuang Zi for three days three nights within the state. Zhuang Zi upon knowing this, tells Hui Shi: 'Down south there is a type of bird called phoenix, the phoenix flies from the southern sea to the northern sea, if not a plane tree it will not perch on it, if not bamboo it will not eat it, if not sweet spring water it will not drink it. An owl finds a dead rat, thinking the phoenix will come snatching it away, it loudly screams at the phoenix flying over!" A clear voice of dripping jade tells the story, originally a familiar story, thus gives off yet a different kind of feeling. Gui Wan smiles at the three people, they deliberately scheme to seize power, exactly is it gold? Silver? Treasures? Perhaps in the eyes of some people, it is but only a dead rat. (Zhuang Zi is the respectful name for Zhuang Zhou – an influential philosopher during the Warring States Period)

After listening to this, Prince Duan's expression darkens, eyes locked onto Gui Wan. Prince of Nan Jun actually appears to be in deep thoughts, those in the room were all able to understand the meaning behind Gui Wan's words, temporarily sinking into their own thoughts, seeming to be affected in the heart, also seeming to have their schemes frankly pointed out.

"Madam really is carefree and easy going, using a dead rat to compare with power and position....." Prince Duan sounds a dry laughter, speaking in a heavy

tone.

Gui Wan declined to comment. Prince of Nan Jun actually speaks up full of smiles: "Zhuang Zi's action certainly delivers his sincere intentions with refinement, Madam's story is even more profound and moving, I have really received a lesson."

Seeing his sincere attitude, seriously taking the story into consideration before speaking, Gui Wan knits her brows, didn't think that this Prince of Nan Jun is even more of a personage than Prince Duan. She breaks into a lucidly elegant laughter with a sound of "pu chi", "It is but a story, there is no need to take it too seriously."

The original cold and still atmosphere inside the room is swept away by this one laugh, Prince Duan and Prince of Nan Jun also cracks a smile, the two people's heart both turning cold, vaguely guessed that Gui Wan has heard their conversation, but she insists on chatting and laughing so freely, acting as though it is all unintentional, but is faintly affecting the atmosphere.

Each one of them making a turn of thoughts, Lou Che remains silent to the end, holding Gui Wan's hand, firmly refusing to loosen his hold. Gui Wan stands up, looking around in a circle, "Gui Wan shall not bother you all further, excuse me." Deeply gazing back at Lou Che, waiting for him to let go, she faintly smiles tranquilly, dainty refined steps making a move, heading out of the discussion hall.

Having just left the discussion hall, the frosty cold hits the face, with absolutely no warmth that she felt in the room before, Gui Wan looks up towards the lone hooked moon hanging in the air, remaining motionless for a long while, hearing footsteps from behind, she turns around, Lou Che was already close in front of her.

Hand held by him again, sleeves covering them, under the moon, those orbs of his actually appears clearer than the moon itself, "Gui Wan, you cannot....."

"Cannot?"

Lou Che hooks her in from her delicately fine waist, tightly hugging her with not the slightest of open gap, with some irrepressible impulse, "Cannot abandon me first, towards you, I will not let go, you got that?" That story just now, Gui

Wan was saying it to him, how could he not know what the deeper meaning behind it is, recalling the words she has once said, he actually felt rather flustered and restless.

Gui Wan nestles into his embrace, clutching onto his clothes, softly saying: "There's an old saying amongst the commoners."

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"En?"

"Marry a chicken follow the chicken, marry a dog follow the dog."

"Oh?"
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Gui Wan faintly smiles in his embrace. In regards to responsibility, she clearly knows he will not change his mind, but she still made the effort to persuade him; in regards to feelings, she too can only walk hand in hand through good and bad, no leaving no abandoning. From now on, they shall never tread through this wave of murky water anymore, the world shall proceed to go on as it should, just now she has already done whatever she herself could do, no longer does she need to shoulder any psychological burden that does not belong to her.

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"Gui Wan....."

"En?"

".....look, the moon view is really great....."
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Gui Wan raises her head in slight surprise, finding that Lou Che's brows are highly lifted, appearing very cheerful, ever so slightly, she still seem to feel a little shy, unable to hold back, she laughs out loud......

This power holder with the court and public in one hand, yet is also a man who occasionally reveals himself crystal clear......is but her husband......

Half a year later.

The Prime Minister Estate extraordinarily bustling, endless streams of horses and carriages at the doors, rubbing shoulders and following steps, a mass of bobbing heads, causing all the surrounding public to rush forth to take a look, pot after pot of flowers being brought into the estate. At this time it is currently the end of spring and early summer, the brilliance of red coming to an end, the

garden appears fairly still and silent, with only herbaceous peonies (芍药) either budding, about to bloom, or already blooming in sparkling radiance. Flowers linking to flowers, leaves linking to leaves, some like crowns, some like bowls, some like silk embroidery balls (xiùqiú/绣球), flowers and greenery, accompanied with all sorts of floral fragrance. Therefore right now all the flowers being sent here from all over the land, only has one species, that is the herbaceous peony.

Gui Wan walks into the garden, seeing the brilliance of purples and reds filling the entire area, she secretly sighs at such a beautiful scenery, like entering fairy wonderland. Eyes glancing all around, when she suddenly sees another pot of extremely gorgeous flowers being brought, carefully taking a look, it is actually a tree peony (), she was slightly stunned, walking up front, the gardener stops what he is doing, awkwardly looking at Gui Wan.

Observing it over and over again, finding that it is indeed a pot of tree peony, Gui Wan ponders in silence. The herbaceous peony and the tree peony are named "The Great Two" amongst flowers. Since the ancient times, it is said: "Tree peony is the flower king, herbaceous peony is the flower prime minister." Officials from all over the land has been sending herbaceous peonies as tribute this year, with the means of flattering Lou Che, meaning "under one person, above thousands". And right now, there is actually someone who sent a pot of the flower king tree peony, the meaning behind this is suspicious, she asks: "Who sent this?"

The gardener slightly panics, hurriedly answering: "By the doors, a lord on the horse carriage sent it." Stammering as he speaks, very compliant, heart lingering in fear as his body half crouches, fearing that any mistake will lead to punishment.

"Where is the one who sent the flowers?"

The gardener raises his head, a face of great fear, pointing towards the right of the main doors, "That horse carriage turned into the small alley by the side."

"Lead the way, I need to go see." Gui Wan gently speaks, looking around, she sees Ling Long, Ru Qing, Ru Ming the three maids attending to the courtyard, well organised, her heart felt much more at ease, lightly throwing back her sleeves, she follows the gardener to the doors.

The main doors were already blocked by the tightly packed crowd, the family's retailers seeing their Madam coming, deliberately opens the right side doors, allowing the two people through. The gardener turns around the right corner where there is less of a crowd, clamouring sounds also gradually fades, Gui Wan squint her eyes as she carefully looks at the small path, suddenly realising this is where she first ran into Ye Li of the Nu Tribe, because this place is right in centre of the Capital, the residencies around here are all of dignitaries, that is why it is particularly quiet. Having only stepped into the alley, she catches glimpse of a black horse carriage parked up at the side of the alley, simple and unadorned, but the fine horses in front of the carriage has shoes as white as snow, are big and tall, clearly a rarely seen precious horse.

Heart suddenly jumping with a trace of anxiety, Gui Wan stops in her steps, standing at the end of the alley, saying to the gardener who is a few steps in front: "Enough, return now." Just when her words were spoken, she turns around, with a sudden blur of her vision, the gardener was actually stood in front of her.

The gardener who was still trembling before with a humble face, is looking as usual right now, revealing a few points of sternness, saying: "Madam, please go take a closer look." Tone stiff, where is there still the stammering appearance from before?

Heart filled with anger, she starts growing suspicious deep down, Gui Wan lightly scolds: "Impudence." How could the servants of the Prime Minister Estate possibly be this bold, usually when she needs things done within the estate, she will always hand it over to Ling Long who always gets the job done smoothly, other than her personal attendants, she is not particularly familiar with other servants, with many people coming today, could it be that he has slipped himself into the estate? As she was thinking, Gui Wan glances over to the alley opening, finding a cluster of black shadows, the alley opening seems to be guarded. She really has taken things too lightly, only wanting to investigate the identity behind the one who sent the flowers, not even keeping her guard up against the servants of the Prime Minister Estate. Looking at the current situation, the identity of the one in the carriage must be extraordinarily honourable, unable to help but to think of one particular person, but that person should be in Yu Gan

Hall, and not in the rear alley of the Prime Minister Estate.

"Madam, Master invites you over for a little chat, may Madam not make things difficult for this little one." The gardener bows his head, once again making an appearance of a courteous and humble servant.

In this situation she cannot refuse. The front doors of the Prime Minister Estate is too rowdy, loudly yelling out will have no use, if the one inside the carriage really is the he that she has guessed, he would inevitably give rise to surging waves on this peaceful ground, here to stir up trouble. Having weighed out the situation like this, Gui Wan combs back the scattered hair by her temple, once again turning back towards the carriage and walks forth.

Only two steps distance away from the carriage, there is absolutely no movements, Gui Wan starts to hesitate, looking back, the gardener is actually not there anymore, in this little alleyway, only her and this horse carriage is left. Wind constantly blowing past inside the alley, it is currently May, the sun brightly shines, the faint flower fragrance lingering in the air, it just so happens that within this elegant tranquillity there carries a trace of unpredictable changes. She considers this over and over again, before taking half a step forward, reaching out to the carriage curtains.

Hand just an inch distant from the curtains, when the black fabric makes a sudden move, rippling as it opens, being lifted from the inside, Gui Wan looks into the carriage in slight surprise.

Suddenly seeing the brightly lit interior, Zheng Liu in a body of light casual clothing, ink coloured patterns embroidered onto the Confucian robes, a jade hair crown holding up his hair, a paper fan in hand, completing the look of an elegant literary person, the corners of his lips raising into a slight curve, those deeply quiet pool of orbs carrying a shallow smile, first gazing at Gui Wan for a moment, before delicately saying: "What? Does Madam not know me now?"

Verifying her previous speculations, the moment she personally sees it, her heart is still somewhat shocked, thoughts making a turn, this spot is within the Prime Minister Estate's range, it is not the inner courtyard of the imperial palace, even if it is the Emperor, he too cannot go to all lengths without hesitation. Gui Wan spreads a smile of indifference, bowing in greeting, "Greetings to your

majesty—"

"Forego the formalities." The person in the carriage makes the first move, the paper fan in hand held out, supporting Gui Wan's half bent body.

The frame of the fan placed on her wrist, passes on waves of coolness, Gui Wan withdraws her hands, elegantly smiles like the chrysanthemums, lightly raising her head, eyes obliquely looking towards Zheng Liu, meeting his veiled and unpredictable dark orbs, she hurriedly looks away in a smooth and neat manner.

"My longing for Madam like the waves, yet Madam actually avoids me like it is the auspicious thing to do, this really makes my soul flee in grieving ah!" Zheng Liu lazily leans against the carriage walls, paper fan gently swaying, fanning one moment and not the next, the refined elegance and warmth he usually faces the ministers with, cannot be seen at all, indiscipline behaviour greatly on show.

Secretly annoyed by this half real half fake attitude of his, as though the entire world is but a game to him, but just have to feel rather afraid of his volatile temperaments, Gui Wan faces him with an attitude of casual ease, "Your majesty must be joking."

"Joking?" Zheng Liu lifts his thin lips, smiling as he says, "Within this entire world, my 'monarch's words are no playful matter' are of the greatest value, Madam actually does not believe me?"

"I dare not." Smile unchanging, Gui Wan stands three steps away from the horse carriage, allowing Zheng Liu to carry sharpness within tenderness like the scissor sharp spring breeze of February, she has always used a smile to deal with it, neither stiff nor soft, neither lifted nor lowered.

"Is it daring not to? Or is it not wanting to?" Eyes circling around her body, paying special attention to her every expression, line of sight quietly wandering around, there is also that brisk glowing look that withers within the wind, one by one making its way into the eyes, repeatedly savouring the taste. Wrist making half a turn, fan pointing to a spot, signalling her to take a seat, "Is it not tiring standing there? Come, accompany me for a little chat."

The fan in Zheng Liu's hand is pointing towards the area where the carriage and thill connects, capable of holding one person, if she sits here, she will be

sitting on the same shoulder level as the Emperor, Gui Wan declines saying: "Thanking your majesty, etiquette between monarch and subject are indispensable."

"Etiquette between monarch and subject," Coldly sounding a scoff, Zheng Liu's like the half moon, within the curve of a slight smile, cold words spits out, "I have said before, do not use this type of unnecessary and over-elaborated formalities to restrain me."

Anger already contained within his words, but within those orbs like deep pools, there is still tender warmth, "Madam, time flies like a spinning spindle, two years have already passed." Purposely mentioning this topic, watching Gui Wan's smile faintly gather away in great satisfaction, but upon seeing her knit her brows together, his heart makes a sudden jump, seeming to ripple out, surging with both familiar and unfamiliar emotions, could this be what they call.....dismay?

Gui Wan rapidly makes calculations in her mind, did not think that that day's irresponsible remark of the two year period only has half a year remaining now.....

"Didn't think that your majesty still remembers that playful joke." Playing innocent as she sounds a melodic laughter, she is set on denying this to a cleaned out end, this matter is only known to the heavens, the earth, the Emperor and her, there is not a third person to stand witness, she insists on saying it was a playful joke, what can he possibly do to her?

"A playful joke?" A sudden rise of his voice, a sharp flash passes Zheng Liu's cold fear inducing pupils, even he himself received a shock, upon seeing the moment she desperately tries to disassociate herself from him, a chord of a particular root of reasoning within his brain snaps in response, wrathful anger rising within his chest, face instantly turning cold, "Madam is taking this for a playful joke?"

Initially he did indeed take this casual gambling deal as a playful pastime, who knew that when he threw it to the back of his mind, he will encounter her in the palace again. Seeing her accompany him in sitting alone within the cold wind, entertaining herself at the side, clearly concealing the hate in her heart, yet her

face only shows a beautifully sweet smile, the efforts of acting differently to how one actually feels inside, how familiar he is with it, like seeing himself in the mirror, he suddenly finds, she is happy and contented with herself, wilfully takes care of herself, with the fluttering style of soaring in the skies, blends in with the norm, but also casts away the norm.

This kind of beauty endowed with the spirits of the universe, his heart grew envy of, also wanting to obtain it.

Sensing his anger dispersing over along with the flow of the wind, Gui Wan unmindfully turns her head to look, eyes sweeping past his fan and that ink coloured clothing rising in the wind, secretly thinking how she is to face his rage. Suddenly seeing his lips hook up, actually sounding another round of laughter, such laugh extremely frivolous.

"Gui Wan, you think that this gambling deal was made by you, thus ending it is also to be set by you?" A charming voice escaping from those lightly pressed lips, Zheng Liu locks his gaze onto her with a ridiculing smile, the tip of his fan placed on the carriage thill, "I did not say to stop, thus this bet must continue."

Name being called out from his mouth, Gui Wan sucks in a breath, sensing that he is only laughing like this due to his anger reaching an extreme state, under the watch of such a smile, her entire body feels like it has stiffened up, "Your majesty has the highest honour as the monarch, how could you quibble over the smallest things with me this mere woman....." If you wish to quibble, the damage inflicted is but only to your honour as the Son of Heaven.

"Using these words to stimulate me? You think the same method can be used on me twice?"

Lightly shrugging her shoulders, Gui Wan displays a helpless demeanour, "Should your majesty really think like that, Gui Wan can also do nothing about it, your majesty rules the world in the name of benevolence, it is best to think all matters over three times."

Hearing this, Zheng Liu is slightly stunned, only now did he get a taste of this woman's wretchedness, blade hidden within her smiles, a seven inch threat drawn at every line, in this very moment, to actually not see her with any falsely adorned smile of slyness, charm like the radiant sun, his heart thumps, instantly

speechless.

Catching onto Zheng Liu's moment of loosened expression, Gui Wan was slightly surprised. Perhaps today she has occupied the upper hand and not the Emperor, this absurd idea suddenly plunges into her mind, but is quickly abandoned with one smile of hers.

To be unoccupied with the advantage right now, is it because of his intention to confuse her? With the bottom of the fan supporting his jaw, Zheng Liu remains silent for a long while, his anger gradually fading, eyes restoring its clear farsightedness, "Since that is so, then the matter of the gambling deal shall be dropped."

"Yes." Gui Wan simply sounds a reply. Although this is the ending she had hoped for, but the success came too fast, practically without any twists and turns, causing her heart to give rise to doubts, also feeling a little uneasy, just getting the feeling like the opposition's purpose is far more than this.

Right now in the alley, not a single noise can be heard, silent to the point of getting a little stuffy, yet the Prime Minister Estate separated by just a wall away is filled with the liveliness of people's voices, gasps and sighs, praises, yelling, occasionally traveling into the ear, sometimes quiet sometimes noisy, in complete contrast, like being in two different worlds. Just when Zheng Liu sunk into silence, Gui Wan in anxiety, a sound of unexpectedly loud yelling as though it is of close proximity "Provincial Governor of He Nan, one pot of Xian Jiu Chong" such voice comes piercing through the air.

"Provincial Governor of He Nan?" Laughing aloud, Zheng Liu extremely casually rests his feet on the carriage thill, turned his head and slowly speaks: "I heard the Prime Minister Estate is having a small celebration today, a grand occasion like this, seems like I really have not come in vain."

A seeming praise when heard, but is actually of ridicule, Gui Wan raises her eyes, seeing him smile like the warm southerly wind (harbouring unpleasant feelings), unable to make out the unpredictable meaning right now, she faces it with indifference.

Hearing all the sounds of relaying reports from the alley, Zheng Liu cracks a smile, "In the end I have underestimated Prime Minister Lou, not only in control

of the six divisional ministers, but even has the local officials of other provinces in his palm. Madam, you tell me, Prime Minister Lou in the imperial court, exactly is it beneficial or harmful?"

A thorny problem thrown right into her face with one change of the subject, really a great sly fox of an Emperor.

"Your majesty has asked wrong."

"Asked wrong?" Raising his brows, Zheng Liu half squints those devilish eyes, smiling as he asks, "How have I asked wrong?"

"First of all, your majesty is asking the wrong person, these words should be asking the three councillors and nine ministers, should be asking the high officials of the court, should not be asking me this mere woman; secondly, your majesty as the highest honour on the imperial throne, naturally has the spirit of the Son of Heaven, to not doubt those working for you, this little bit of tolerance, how could you not have any?"

Zheng Liu freezes for a moment, followed by a round of hearty laughter.

"Good, good....." Once again using words to catch him out, the woman before him appears frail, every word is a gem, every phrase sharp and cutting, constantly making him hatefully grit his teeth, but there just also has to be a trace of nameless unwillingness, "A great glib tongue. Gui Wan, you being so pressing with that sharp tongue, are you not afraid I will steel my heart to destroy you? You really think I will endlessly condone you?"

Seeing him speak so coldly, anger revealed on the outside, Gui Wan was secretly in fear, nodding as she says: "It is your majesty who told me to answer the question, could it be that speaking honestly and frankly is also wrong?" Such tone as though suffering injustice, not even giving in an inch of a step. Today she has gained the location advantage, she just does not believe the Emperor will launch an attack on the spot.

Clearly aware the pitiful look of suffering injustice she is displaying is mainly an act, but hearing the tender delivery of voice, somewhere in his heart, he softens up, the anger he felt also half dispersed, the remaining half gloomily resting in his chest. Zheng Liu darkens his face, seeing her carrying seven points of false attitude towards himself, he increasingly dislikes this feeling, just like admiring

flowers in the fog, unable to see the distinctive realness in it no matter what. Could it be that this realness is that hard to find?

"Since you want to speak honestly and frankly, then let us speak our minds today." Face filled with warmth, Zheng Liu uses the fan to tap at the carriage thill, "Are you not tired? Come take a seat in accompanying me." The final sentence filled with tenderness.

Originally not feeling it, upon hearing his reminder, Gui Wan could only feel both her legs already nearly as numb as wooden logs, unfortunately that carriage thill spot is absolutely off limits, and the surrounding area has not a single area to take a rest at, lightweight, her face appears contented, "Not tired, many thanks to your majesty's good intentions."

"One question, you rejected me twice, could it be my good intentions, you disdain this much?" His grace, everyone across the world will bow down in hopes for it, only she will although respond with a smile, but actually refuse it from thousands of li away.

Looking into Zheng Liu's eyes in surprise, actually catching the fleeting feeling of hurt, she knits her curved brows together, changing the subject: "Should your majesty wish to speak freely, Gui Wan shall respond standing here, only then will we be complying with the social customs."

Coldly sounding a scoff, Zheng Liu declines to comment, look of displeasure directing at Gui Wan, pausing for a moment, he asks: "You think.....being within the Prime Minister Estate range today, I cannot afford to make a public display of any kind, thus being completely restrained?"

Her inner thoughts nailed down in one phrase, Gui Wan frankly shows a faint smile, neither denying nor admitting.

"The entire Capital City sits in the palm of my hand, for how long can the glory of the Prime Minister Estate last? Prince of Nan Jun has already returned to his land two months ago, Prince Duan has although been vindicated, but reduced to a second rank (official), far less than before. Could it be you really think Lou Che joining hands with these two people, is able to win?"

Within this past half of the year, first the northern division entering the Capital, then the southern army moving north, the armies equal in strength, but

also cannot stay in the Capital for a long time, in the end they could only do nothing about it; however after this deadlock, the Emperor had not choice but to put an end to Prince Duan's injustice, clearing off the suspicions from the Changes of Feng Shan. On the surface, it looks like Lou Che has prevailed, first causing the northern division return with no success, then pushing the Emperor to give in. But thinking about it carefully, amongst all this, Lou Che's political alliance did not receive the slightest bit of profit. In order to counterbalance the Emperor's military troops, mobilised the southern army's defence forces, the use of the northern division is the burden of the nation's treasury (funding), and the use of the southern army, is the burden of Nan Jun, one's loss is another's gain, how can the power of one county compete with that of one country? And Prince Duan is promoted in name but demoted in reality, a great loss of power, faux power held in name only. Therefore the apparent glory displayed on the surface over this past half of the year, is in fact of extreme danger, one careless step, far beyond redemption.

This score, Gui Wan is naturally well aware of, leisurely speaking in a melodic tone: "Your majesty is that certain of winning? Even if you win, there is still a definite heavy price to pay, the country is but your majesty's, with the slightest damage, the one most distressed, is still your majesty right?"

"Growing a malignant tumour on your hand, one should cut it off first, you cannot just wait for it to wear away the entire body right? I will not let the entire body go into ruin, just because of being unable to bear losing one hand."

"Unfortunately, before any malignant tumour has grown yet, cutting off that hand, could this be a wise decision?"

Engaging in dispute with Lou Che, putting the imperial court in danger, under one war, both sides suffering losses, an outcome like this, even the Son of Heaven, cannot possibly accept it so easily.

"Without this one hand, I can also find another hand in replacement, within this world, could it be there is no one capable of replacing Lou Che?" A scorning thorn as though pricking into Gui Wan's innocence, Zheng Liu speaks ever so softly, implied chill thoroughly exposed.

Understanding the aesthetic pleasure upon hearing the striking of chords, Gui

Wan immediately thinks of the youth who was once as clear as water, being held in importance use by the Emperor, emerging as a striking figure in the imperial court, gradually earning himself a position amongst positions, although still incapable of endangering Lou Che as of now, but recalling the causes and consequences of him entering officialdom, she is still finding it difficult to unburden her heart. Sunken into deep thoughts for moment, she actually forgets to answer the Emperor's question.

Up until Zheng Liu looks at her still in the eye, asking: "Is no one able to replace Lou Che? All that he has given, I can also give....."

"Madam.....Madam!" The old housekeeper's hoarse voice mingled with anxiety floats over the wall, from far and swiftly nears, Gui Wan hearing this, solves the dilemma before her eyes. The hidden guards appears one after the other from the corner of alley, approaching the horse carriage.

Seeing the guards come surrounding them, Gui Wan secretly makes a speculation, this is the opportunity to escape. Just as she was about to turn around, feet upon making the slightest movement, the tingling numbness of both her legs were tremendous, difficult to raise her foot, it was in this slacking moment, that Zheng Liu gathers away his laidback attitude, jumping down from the carriage, just like a swimming dragon, he darts forward, abruptly seizing her hand, strong capturing her in place, Gui Wan caught off guard, pulled in front of Zheng Liu, facing Zheng Liu's sharp eyes in surprise.

"He can, could it be I can't then?" Catching her seemingly wanting to escape, he is angered by this, not caring for the inappropriate timing and place, also not caring for his personal bodyguards freezing on the spot due to his unusual behaviour, taking no measures with his actions; he only stares at her relentlessly, as though wanting to gather any traces of clues from her face, not paying any attention to anything else around him, although appearing wild he still continues to be crazy.

"Cannot, because you are not Lou Che." Wrist gripped onto by him, burning sensation spreading out from her wrist, a faint stinging pain, she endures, not showing the slightest bit of weakness in her tone, revealing calm arrogance.

From within her leisurely clear and bright orbs, he sees his own wild arrogance

being reflected, Zheng Liu feels the increasing sensation of his heart firing up, rather than hearing this kind of answer, it is better to continue seeing her be fake and indirectly astringent, that way, it will not be like this very moment, unable to let go, but also cannot not let go. The darkness in those slightly narrowed eyes deepens, calm but also holds lingering feelings entangled with pain, even his refined and free smile braces such bitter taste.

One hand pinching onto her chin, watching the wind bring a few strands of hair stroking past her lips, he lightly lets out a long drawn out sigh, deeply grabbing eyes darkening even more, lowering his head in wanting to kiss those sweet smelling lips.

Heart missing a beat, hurriedly trying to move her head back, deeply desiring to avoid his demand, the hand free from his grasp pushes against his chest, who knew he would remain absolutely still, unable to evade it, that hot breath that is already at an extremely close distance grows more dense in between breaths.

"Huang......Huang Gentleman." Not knowing who spoke up from the side, cutting through the space of this alleyway. Zheng Liu jumps awake, lips moved to the side, a light kiss brushing past Gui Wan's cheek; once again bowing his head to look, seeing the look of pain on her face, his hand loosen its hold.

Gaining her freedom, Gui Wan desperately takes a big step back, the guards have already surrounded the horse carriage in a circle, the leader amongst them looking at Zheng Liu with a few points of anxiety, opening his mouth but does not know how to say it. The lively noises by the front doors of the Prime Minister Estate has already lightened, with no signs of reporting flower names for a long time now, the crowd has already begun to disperse, soon there will be people passing by the alley, such scenario, what are they to do?

Realising they cannot stay for any longer, Zheng Liu gathers away his devilish state, gloominess hidden within his deep orbs, looking at Gui Wan, those thin lips slightly hooks up into an arc, fine sharpness sweeping past the eyes, containing remnants of chilling cold.

"Looks like my condoning towards you......is already far beyond expectations," Zheng Liu smiles with seeming self-mockery, "But the price for this, you may not be able to bear, Gui Wan....." A final sound of tender calling, like a curse

escaping the lips, he throws back his sleeves, boarding the carriage without looking back, the black curtains rises and falls, blocking the sight of those from outside the carriage.

From another side of the alley, a few horses have already been pulled out, the guards swiftly mounting the horses, coachman raises the whip, the horse carriage turns to another direction, the spinning of the carriage wheels accompanies the bursts of horse hooves, drifting further away.

Gui Wan turns her back, walking out of the alley, wrist still sensing pain, pulling up her sleeves, she reveals a her fair wrist, a big red mark clearly visible, the edges are even starting to turn purple, gently stroking it, she lets out a breath of relief, the Emperor's temper is originally extremely unpredictable, today it is even more insolent, abrupt anger abrupt gloominess, full of ups and downs.

"Madam....." The old housekeeper upon seeing her, face revealing happiness, quickly making his way over, "Madam? Where exactly did you go? Haven't seen you for half a day, I even.....pei, pei, look at my old mouth, almost spoke of the unpleasant." Rambling on, upon getting a close look, he finds that Gui Wan's face appears a little pale, receiving a fright. "Madam? What happened? Did you come across something?"

"Nothing, it was a little noisy inside, I came out for some fresh air." Turning her eyes with a smile to cover up.

Nodding in acceptance, the old housekeeper places the doubts within in his heart, Madam is Lord Prime Minister's treasure in the palm, servants need only to serve in dedication, daring not to intervene at all.

"Where's Lord Prime Minister?" Following the old housekeeper in returning into the courtyard, seeing the servants of the Prime Minister Estate busying around, people lined with flowers, flowers reflecting the people, blossoming flowers like embroidering everywhere, amongst them there is just no sight of the Prime Minister Estate's master.

"Lord Prime Minister is in the study room discussing matters with visiting officials." Waving his hand from the side, telling the servant to bring a chair over, placing it in the shaded area of the garden, allowing Gui Wan to sit there, whilst taking a nice little rest, can also admire the flowers for entertainment.

"What people are there in the study room?" Very leisurely asking this, Gui Wan leans back on the chair, one hand supporting her chin, gathering the beautiful scene of the courtyard into her eyes. A few divisional officials within the Capital, also a few lower ministers, state governors of He Nan, Tan Zhou, also......"

Respectfully saying everything that he knows, but at the very end, reveals a slight holding back of the tongue.

"Also?" Gui Wan raises her brows.

Heavily nodding his head a few times, the old housekeeper shows a demeanour of helplessness, explaining: "There is also a strange person who came today, not only gifting flowers, also self-claiming to have the talents to bring peace to the country, Lord Prime Minister summoned him, actually also letting him discuss matters in the study room......" Perhaps because this matter has never happened before, the old housekeeper's tone reveals endless amounts of curiosity.

Lightly sounding a reply, Gui Wan declines to comment, silently sitting in waiting within the courtyard, waiting like this, she waited till the sun descends the mountain peaks, bright lanterns hung up. The study room doors finally opens, filing out are a few officials old and new in silk clothing and jade belts, all with a distinctive look of sternness, when stepping out the doors, they were still whispering to one another in discussion of something, several people catches glimpse of someone within the courtyard, examining eyes looking over, seeing Gui Wan sat amongst the clusters of flowers, not one did not reveal a stunned look, followed by thinking of something, their faces all changes slightly, turning their heads away, lowering their heads whilst walking, heading out of the courtyard.

The last one following behind, is actually a man in cotton clothing, this is originally of no wrong, but following after the group of glamorously dress officials, it indeed appears a little strange. Gui Wan immediately understands this is the strange person the old housekeeper spoke of, only seeing him look towards her, with no expression at all, just like seeing nothing, and also follows the others' pacing, walking in leave from the courtyard.

[1] The proverb used for **having everything planned out** is called **chéng zhú zài xiōng /** 成竹在胸 which literally translates to having a **complete [image of] of**

bamboo embedded in one's chest (heart) – before painting bamboo, the image of bamboo is already in one's heart.

Part 2

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Raising The Water (Part Two)

Waiting till all the officials have cleared away, Gui Wan stands up, walking up to the study room, before reaching the steps, the study room doors opens, and Lou Che walks out.

"Gui Wan?" The fragrance of herbaceous peony drifting over the entire garden, Lou Che smiles towards her.

Setting foot onto the steps, Gui Wan contains a tranquil smile, "About time Husband finished busying yourself....."

"Waited for long?" Holding up her hand, they slowly head towards the floral hall, "No need to wait for me to eat, careful of your body, don't starve yourself."

Lightly leaning on him, heart feeling as ease, Gui Wan smiles without answering.

The floral hall is already brightly lit up, Ling Long stands by the table, upon

seeing the two of them arrive, she hurriedly orders the servants to start dinner. An entire table of steaming dishes, just smelling the aroma, will arouse one's appetite.

Cups and dishes crisscrossing, seeing Lou Che down two cups of wine, Gui Wan was secretly surprised, placing down the jade chopsticks, asking: "Husband is in such a good mood today, did you encounter some sort of happy matter?"

"A person," Looking at the alcohol swirling in the wine cup, Lou Che says: "Today I gained someone who is of great benefit to me."

Is he pointing to that youth in cotton clothing? To actually be able to receive such great acknowledgement from Lou Che? "Oh? According to Husband's words, even more talented than Guan Xiu Wen?"

Hearing this name, Lou Che's wine cup touches the table, a dark expression faintly spreads. Back then in the estate he already felt that there is a gap between them that could not be eliminated no matter what, sure enough, that thought has been verified now, this boy takes to such viciously brutal means, acts with cutting decisiveness, also just like a promising youth of the next generation of the imperial court, although still lacking success right now, but in time, he will definitely become great disaster. And towards him, what annoys Lou Che most, is not his increasingly solidifying strength and capabilities, but his eyes, clear like water, yet also carrying madness.

That state of obsession seems to be dedicated towards Gui Wan.....heart bursting into boiling irritations, seeing Gui Wan naturally blurt out this name, appearing calm, Lou Che is relieved, answering: "This person's talent is not of the First Ranked Scholar talent, completely different to Guan Xiu Wen."

Lightly curling her lips, Gui Wan sounds a laugh: "Could it be a military talent?" Seeing the appearance of that young commoner, he does not seem like a military talent, compared to Lin Rui En, feels like he is missing something.

"He may be highly skilled in martial arts, but does not have the talent to lead troops in battles," Seeing Gui Wan's displeased state, Lou Che is slightly startled, no one could have imagined, even though they have been married for more than three years, seeing her heavenly smile every day, his heart still palpitates because of her, seeming to have already been completely satisfied, "His talent

lies in being able to replace any single person within the imperial court."

Seeing Gui Wan lightly crease her brows, Lou Che explains: "Gaining him alone, is equal to gaining an entire family line. Have you by chance heard of the Shu Clan down south?"

Seeming to have seen a recording of this in San Niang's notebook, vaguely remembering San Niang has once noted that this family comes from the martial arts world, but operates in an honest and upright manner, a rich and generous family. Gui Wan takes a look at Lou Che, "What of the Shu Clan?"

"This family has gave birth to talented people for generations, carries out tasks extremely carefully, with but a few years, emerged as a rising power within the southern area, a promising future."

Gaining one person, equal to gaining the entire family is originally of this meaning. The final mouthful of soup into the throat, Gui Wan raises her head, looking at Lou Che, originally desiring to tell him of today's matter, but looking at it now, it is not the right time, sighing in her heart, forget it, forget it. The conflict within this imperial court is already intense, why add another score to it, he and the Emperor really is to further deepen the bad blood between them, only afraid that these days of peace is already coming to an end.

Vaguely seeing worries hung between her brows, Lou Che softly asks: "Not feeling well?"

Shaking her head, Gui Wan's smile blossoms, "Sat in the garden for too long, the flower fragrance has made me feel drowsy."

Taking a closer look at her fatigue already showing, Lou Che is absolutely pained in the heart, standing up, he takes her hand, "Since you are tired, do not force yourself to go on, quickly go back to take a rest." Reaching out to stroke her hair, lightly stopping at the tip of her hair, when she stands up, he gently holds her waist.

Although aware that Gui Wan is not frail, but he always unconsciously wants to tuck her under his wing. With the current situation of instability, only this Prime Minister Estate, seems to be the ark in the chaotic waves, no matter how the outside world is struggling in the open rivalry and hidden scheming, here, it will forever be of fragrant flowers and singing birds. His turn of a hand to form

clouds, flip of hand to form rain, is all but in exchange for a corner of cosiness. During early dawn, to see Gui Wan groom herself in front of the dressing mirror, inside and outside of the courtyard, seeing Gui Wan's laughter linger around. An entire life intoxicated in trickeries, only he knows, gaining power is not easy, losing it is but within a blink of an eye.

"What is Husband thinking about?" Turning down the corridor, already arriving at the room doors, Gui Wan turns her head to look at Lou Che.

Lou Che gently strokes her cheek, whispering: "Blusher lighting the jade." Pushing open the doors upon entering, lighting up the candles, the inside of the room instantly brightens up, silk brocaded draperies, tassels of the glass palace lanterns swaying, dressing table made of carved rosewood, all greeting the eyes.

Taking out the hair ornaments, allowing the black hair to flow down, Gui Wan's body like mist covered water circulating around her, "Looks like Husband really has special liking to the herbaceous peony," This blusher is a famous herbaceous peony product, a lot of it has been sent into the estate today.

This smile of hers really is like dispelling the clouds to see the sun, no words can describe how distinguished and admirable such elegance is, Lou Che silently watches her clear off the excessive magnificence (make up), long hair fluttering along with her beauty.

Lifting her up, placing her on the bed, covering her with the silk quilt, watching her close her eyes, until her breathing settles, revealing the state of sinking into sweet sleep, and only then did he settle down, placing a kiss on her cheek, with soft speech and low laughter: "This blusher lighting the jade, since when was I speaking of the peonies." Reluctant to part, he repeatedly looks at her, before finally standing up, walking out of the room.

Feeling like he was only in the room for short moment, only upon stepping out did he find, the moon is already sitting above the willow tree.

The old housekeeper and Lou Sheng stands at the entrance of the courtyard, waiting for Lou Che to step out of the inner courtyard, the two of them bows their head in apology.

"I heard someone sent a pot of tree peonies today?" A deep voice asks, Lou

Che reveals a biting chill within his faint smile.

"Yes," The old housekeeper follows behind him, heading towards the discussion hall, "Heard a lord amongst the many carriages sent it."

"Who did Madam see today?" Gui Wan was a little absentminded, he may have not mentioned it, but has indeed noted it inside.

"This....." Forehead lined with sweat, the old housekeeper evasively answers, "Madam did leave for a little while, perhaps it was only to admire the flowers by the front doors....."

A sound of a cold scoff cutting off his words, Lou Che turns to his left, "Lou Sheng!"

Lou Sheng silently takes two steps forward without a word, closely following behind.

"How did the investigation go?"

"Unfortunately failed to accomplish orders." A sonorous and forceful answer.

The study room quiet to point that one can even hear a needle drop, Lou Che sits at the desk for a long time, suddenly letting out a long drawn out sigh: "You're saying, in the end there is no movements?"

"Yes, General Lin is stationed at the border, this past month, only a small number of defensive troops have been mobilised, all within a normal range." Lou Sheng stands straight, with not a trace of laxness as he answers, the terrible scars on half his face hidden in the shadows.

"Stationed at the frontier? Could it be an imminent war?" Lou Che has a trace of suspicions, "Nu King passed away two months ago, the Nu Tribe is currently thrown into chaos with inner struggles, Lin Rui En has no need to personally take charge of the frontier....."

"That is right, according to investigations, the Nu Tribe is indeed showing no signs of starting war."

Waves of faintly elegant floral fragrance flowing in from the half opened windows, like the sweetness of fruits, Lou Che half squints his eyes, as though he

is in deep thoughts, hooking up a smile, "These two months, you have been at the frontier, from what you seen, Lin Rui En, how is this person?"

Surprised by this question, Lou Sheng raises his face, without thinking of the previous two questions, he immediately answers, feeling a little hesitant right now, thinking over it a few times, before saying: "Is a true man." Work and rest along with the other soldiers, not arrogant not impulsive, good mannered, calm and collected when commanding, indeed the demeanour of a famous general.

Knowing that his words "true man" contains many meanings, Lou Che smiles, eyes as darks as night sweeping past him, "The Lin family has been loyal and righteous for generations, gaining the most trust from the Emperor, at this time, with no signs of war, he stands guard at the borders, this sure is interesting....."

A great Zheng Liu, is this the imperial heart standing on top this time round? Using fundamental principles to face the shifting events?

All along, he has been keeping watch of Lin Rui En's every move, what Zheng Liu relies on, other than the portion of close ministers within the Capital, is this military pillar, this time round, not transferring Lin Rui En back into the Capital, is it because of putting another scheme in play, or is to fool others?

"Lord Prime Minister." Lou Sheng lowly calls out, watching Lou Che very leisurely open his eyes, "Just now, I saw that Shu Yu Tian wandering outside the Prime Minister Estate."

"Shu Yu Tian?" Lightly mumbling this, only just recalling this is the name of the southern Shu Clan's leader, Lou Che creases his brows, a long while after, he says, "Send for someone to continue monitoring Lin Rui En's every move, also, investigate into the southern Shu Clan's situation."

Lou Sheng simply answers yes, his lowered bowing posture unchanging.

The room restores its earlier silence, slight stuffiness also contained within, floral fragrance overflowing, also tasting like the influence of pure alcohol in affect.

Lou Che lazily leans back on the chair, eyes lightly closing, seeming to have already fallen asleep, yet Lou Sheng remains absolutely motionless, silently waiting.

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"Lou Sheng."

"Here."
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"Tell the housekeeper to pick out a few beauties, then choose some treasures, gifting it to Shu Yu Tian." Opening his eyes, Lou Che supports his cheek in one hand, displaying the clear noble demeanour of dignitary.

Lou Sheng freezes without responding, although gifting wealth, gifting beauties is a good way to win people over, but very little does Lord Prime Minister use this method, why would he order such this time? To have ordered to investigate the Shu Clan's background just now.....towards the Shu Clan, exactly is he trusting or not?

"Lord Prime Minister, what if he does not accept them?"

"Not accepting, is a clear statement that he has other intentions." If he does not accept, this point will be proved, everything the Shu Clan wants, is far beyond status and money.

"Shu Clan is originally wealthy, not accepting, could perhaps be because he does not care....." Knowing Lord Prime Minister currently needs to use people, Lou Sheng speaks up in the Shu Clan's defence.

Lou Che lowly laughs upon hearing this, but his smile does not reach his eyes, "One who is money greedy never has enough of gaining money, one who is lustful never has enough of gaining more beauties. if he really does not accept it, then it is clear that his ambitions does not just stop there, this type of person, will definitely become great disaster in future."

Heavily nodding a few time, announcing his leave, Lou Sheng walks out of the study room.

Slowly standing up, Lou Che paces up to the window, within the darkness, using the thin lighting of the moon, he sees an entire courtyard of herbaceous peony flowers arousing sympathy and affection as they sway in the wind, a willowy posture.

"Tree peony....." Lightly sounding a sigh, practically inaudible, he deeply frowns.

In this entire world there is only one person who dares to send the king of flowers on this day......a great trick of psychological attacks makes the best offense, both wanting to shake his confidence, also wanting to use the flowers to warn him, no matter how valuable the herbaceous peony is, it is still below the tree peony.

Not putting Lin Rui En to use, could it be the Emperor has another dependence? Is it the Capital's provincial commander in chief? Or is it the one with gradually strengthening wings Guan Xiu Wen?

Between long term survival and disputes, Lou Che has already grown accustomed to the existence of intrigues, only this time, there is no warning at all, yet he is able to sense an existing danger......

Must gradually consolidate with every step, only then would he be able to keep hold of everything.

Playing on the chessboard, playing with the entire world.

Hurried steps entering the inner courtyard, the fragrance of herbaceous peonies clinging to the nostrils, relaxing the heart. Lou Sheng slows down his pace, waves of pleasant laughter suddenly reaches his ears from the chambers of the inner courtyard, he attentively looks over, by the flowerbeds in the inner courtyard, Prime Minister Lou, Madam playing a game of chess, Ru Qing, Ru Ming and other maids standing in waiting, even the old housekeeper is standing by the side, attentively watching.

Silently coming to a stop, Lou Sheng stands at a distance, a small booklet firmly held in hand, not knowing whether to enter or withdraw in this moment.

Summer air gradually thickening, rendering the entire city in lush green, just like the previous years, southeast wind rises, bringing great vitality to the Capital City. And this year, within this high spirited green there is the addition of other gorgeous colours blending in, really does give a great feeling to the heart.

The situation in the imperial court like an arrow readied on the bow, tensing the more it stretches. Battle of the political parties appears to be unavoidable, the camps of officials in the Capital has also been sharply divided, seeming to be a huge gamble, choosing one between the two parties, the victors shall continue to stand prideful in officialdom, the losers will have nothing.

The Lou Estate is clearly the leading wave of the war, first to be affected, but right when this undercurrent is surging, amongst such time of open rivalry and hidden scheming, this inner courtyard is actually overflowing with floral fragrance bringing faint leisure, flowers clustered like a brocade.

Laughter occasionally drifting past right now, peace masking the disputes in the imperial court, or is it but a scene of illusionary splendour?

"Lou Sheng, why the need to stand so far away?" As he is placing down the chess piece, Lou Che turns his head to see a figure stood in the courtyard, calling out to him.

Lou Sheng nods his head, walking forward, standing to the left of the chessboard as he hides the booklet behind him, only here, is one able to see Lord Prime Minister's sincere and hearty laughter, why should he rudely disturb him?

Lou Che as white, Gui Wan as black, performing exhilarating kills on the chessboard, Gui Wan's chess skills is in fact far more lacking that that of Lou Che's, with but only one word of ingenious is she able to repeatedly engage in the struggles with Lou Che, Lou Che too is holding back a bit, the two people's joy lies in playing chess, and not in winning.

White rises black falls, in a blink of an eye the chessboard already reaches another win-lose conclusion, Ru Qing, Ru Ming covers their mouths in laughter, Gui Wan pouts her lips, ten fingers spreading out, pushing across the chessboard, murmuring: "Lost again, not playing anymore." On the chessboard, the black and white chess pieces mixes together, beyond recognition.

Even the old housekeeper could not hold back from spreading a smile, Lou Che is only able to smile in helplessness, only in this precise moment, is he able to catch a glimpse of Gui Wan's reckless and spoilt demeanour, how could he bear to disagree with her, just let it go with a smile, not speaking of winning or losing again.

Gui Wan raises her head and notices Lou Sheng stood by the side, although carrying a faint smile, but hands are hidden behind his back, slightly aware that he must have important matters to report, she gathers away her deep smiles,

standing up, mouth mumbling chess is a waste of mental thinking, leading the two maids far away in leave.

Elegantly delicate laughter faintly fades after her.

"Lord Prime Minister," Lou Sheng presents the booklet in hand before him, passing it to the front of the chessboard, "Here is the investigations of the southern Shu Clan and the recent situation in the Capital."

Left hand holding a black chess piece, very casually tossing it onto the chessboard, sounding a clear ring as it falls, Lou Che accepts the booklet, flipping through the pages, coming to an abrupt stop, eyes fixed on the booklet, "How did the sending of gifts go?"

Lou Sheng's eyes also falls upon the page Lou Che has his attention on, it is only a very ordinary report introducing the family structure of the Shu Clan, slightly surprised, he answers: "Already sent them over, Shu Yu Tian accepted them all, and appeared very pleased too."

Very attentively looking over the same page a few times, Lou Che closes the booklet, "This Shu Clan is still a truly difficult puzzle."

"Did Lord Prime Minister not say, if he accepted all this, then it is good to use the Shu Clan?" Lou Sheng speaks of the questions in his heart.

"You say he accepted the beauties and treasures with a very pleased expression," Lou Che stirs the scattered chess pieces beside the chessboard, seeming to be considering something, suddenly smiling, "In your eyes, do you think Madam is beautiful?"

Freezing on the spot, not only Lou Sheng's mouth drops, even the housekeeper reveals an expression of being hit by the absolutely unimaginable. Struck dumbfounded for a while, Lou Sheng snaps out of it, seeing that Lord Prime Minister seems to be waiting for the answer, he seriously thinks it over, in his heart, naturally there is no woman better, prettier than Ran Yi in this world. But he too is no fool, naturally aware of Madam's beauty, a rare find in this world, such direct answer, would it not be too rude? It is in his nature to not lie in front of Lou Che, and so he bluntly speaks: "Madam is beautiful beyond compare."

"I heard Housekeeper say, when Shu Yu Tian stepped out of the room, seeing Gui Wan, he turns a blind eye, a person like this, even Gui Wan's beauty is unable to shake him in the slightest, how could he be tempted by the beauties gifted, afraid that his attitude of pleasure is also an act. This person's scheming is far beyond yours and my expectations."

Sailing through the many ups and downs within officialdom for many years, he had long gained the insight into the phenomena in the world, gaining the First Ranked Scholar title before the tender age of twenty, then due to contributing to Crown Prince's death, experienced standing on top of the political dispute against the Empress Dowager, all this were not reliant on luck.

"According to Lord Prime Minister's meaning, Shu Clan is to be abandoned, not of use?"

"Such talent, how could we possibly not use," Lou Che stands up, sweeping his eyes across the garden of flickering emerald green, "Use whenever of use, the Shu Clan has all types of talented people, rather than letting others use them, why not leave it for our own use, but must remain three points on guard towards them." A matter of urgency, need to first solidify his power, this battle of power between him and Zheng Liu, the stances of the officials within the Capital is already very difficult to change at this point, to gain assisting strength at a time like this, it will undoubtedly add to a better grasp, as to whether this assisting strength will become a threat in future, it is better to wait till the dispute with Zheng Liu is over before taking it into greater consideration.

Lou Sheng bows his head gladly convinced, "Yes, I shall go arrange work for the Shu Clan."

A month after this, the Shu Clan is working under the Prime Minister Estate, indeed as Lou Che has expected, using the Shu Clan is very beneficial, taking action within the Capital, wining over officials, passing on information and so on, they carry out tasks thoroughly, careful in taking care of matters. Be it in terms of people, finance, material, the Shu Clan holds extremely strong assets, playing up a multiplier effect.

The situation in the Capital remains at a deadlock. The reforming of the "Central Academy" proposed by the Emperor has not progressed in the slightest,

and the six divisions based in Prime Minister Lou's party are also actively working, other than increasing the influence on the Capital's officials, Lou Che has also established contact with local officials of the southern region, consolidating the power in his hands.

In imperial court lies peace and prosperity, outside imperial court lies disputes and struggles.

Amidst the heat of July, Minister of Personnel from the six divisions dies a sudden death. Not even three days after the news of death spread, and the original Assistant Minister of Personnel has taken over the minister post, at the same time, Zheng Liu announces Guan Xiu Wen as Assistant Minister of Personnel. The former Assistant Minister of Personnel is a cowardly person by nature, was originally wavering between the dispute of two political parties, to face such a severe situation right now, he is even more afraid to speak too much of matters regarding the ministry of personnel, taking shelter with the front of recuperating his health, Guan Xiu Wen this newly appointed Assistant Minister thus perfectly justifiably becomes the true power holder of the ministry of personnel.

Mid-July, Prime Minister Estate.

Summer heat scorching hot, people exhausted as cicadas sounds their calls, lotus leaves linking together, with red lotus head floating above the green waves, a passing of slight breeze, lightly forming ripples, the fireflies happily frolics around, dots of red against the emerald green, such movements suitably fitting.

"A great strategy of raiding....." Looking at the beautiful scene within the courtyard, Lou Che sounds a sigh, "Rather than putting Zhang's hat on Li's head (to wrongly attribute something to another), just grasp hold of the ministry of personnel, his majesty can also be considered to have expended much care and thoughts."

"Lord Prime Minister, the timing of Minister of Personnel's death is far too coincidental, could it be....." Lou Sheng lowers his voice as he speaks, reaching up to wipe the sweat on his face. The study room is located in a peaceful area, but with the scorching heat of summer, the heat endlessly flows in from outside,

so stuffy that it gets to one's head.

"So what if that is the case, the outcome already turned out like this, even if we are to investigate the cause of death, it will still be of no help." Within such gentle refined tone there hides a trace of anger that even he himself does not realise, Lou Che takes hold of the teacup from the table and takes a drink, fan gently swaying, looking out to the cloudless skies and lotus pond.

Towards this move of Zheng Liu's, he cannot not be full of praises, to take to such means, is not only beyond everyone's expectations, but also holds a shock factor.

Lou Che silently stands, for a while, not a single person makes a sound within the study.

"Lord Prime Minister," The old housekeeper stands outside the study room doors, solemn and cautious as he reports from there, "Shu Yu Tian is requesting for an audience."

"Oh?" Arousing a trace of interest, Lou Che sits up straight, "Welcome." To come at a time like, he believes there must be a strategy to offer, he shall like to see, exactly what kind of spectacular capability the Shu Clan has.

The housekeeper sounds his reply, for a moment no sound can be heard from outside, after a while, the half opened doors are slowly pushed opened, a youth in commoner's clothing steps into the room, his facial features very delicate, but once put together, it can only be described with the word ordinary, the most characteristic feature is that pair of phoenix eyes, elegance exhibited within his gaze. Upon entering, he bends his body in a bow, "Greeting Lord Prime Minister."

"Why all the formalities, please sit." Lou Che faintly smiles, graciously motioning his hand, signalling for him to sit on the guest seat.

The housekeeper behind him orders a maid to serve up tea, Lou Che exchanges a few words of pleasantries with him, Shu Yu Tian acts reasonably, neither humble nor pushy, responding appropriately, speaking carefully yet smoothly.

"Is Lord Prime Minister troubled by the ministry of personnel matters?" Only three people remains in the room, Shu Yu Tian takes a few glances outside, thinking over it a few times, before speaking out loud.

Straight to the point^[1], also eliminating the need to speculate his thoughts, Lou Che frankly says: "That's right."

"Lord Prime Minister originally had six divisions in the palm of your hand, holding the lifeline of the imperial court, despite the bad blood between you and his majesty, his majesty misgivings are too deep, daring not to do anything, this is Lord Prime Minister's greatest advantage to this day. And with Minister of Personnel's death, the situation goes through a huge shift, the current minister holds the position but does not care for its matters, the one who truly holds power is Lord Guan. Lord Guan may be Lord Prime Minister's student in name, but his heart is more biased towards his majesty," Pausing for a moment, he takes a peek at Lou Che's expression, seeming to show no signs of annoyance nor anger, Shu Yu Tian puts his heart at ease, the endless flow of analysis continues, "The six divisions are thus unable to connect into one wall, Lord Prime Minister's power has also revealed a crack. The ministry of personnel to others, may not be of much importance, but to Lord Prime Minister, it is of extreme importance, is it not?"

A clear flash sweeps past those deep orbs, Lou Che hooks up the corner of his lips, smiling at Shu Yu Tian, "Your observation is very thorough."

"Lord Prime Minister is over praising, our Shu Clan is dedicated in serving Lord Prime Minister, of course we will look at Lord Prime Minister's political career in greater importance than anything else." Shu Yu Tian sits straight, behaving with utmost seriousness, "Amongst the six divisions, ministry of personnel determines the promotions and transferring of officials, one cannot see the importance of their role within a short moment, but as time goes on, it will definitely affect Lord Prime Minister. This one move of the current Emperor, can be described as taking away the firewood from under the cauldron^[2], is of extreme formidability."

Indeed a talent, analysing the situation without a single drop of flaw, Lou Che casually sways his fan, faintly speaking: "Whatever great plan you have, you may speak of it directly."

Appearing rather surprised by such direct manner of Lou Che's, Shu Yu Tian is

slightly stunned, then smiles: "Lord Prime Minister, since his majesty disrupted our camp, we can completely follow his example."

Using one's doings to apply on another's body, indeed a great plan. Lou Che deeply ponders without a word, taking into consideration each and every possible candidate in his mind, unable to think of who he can send to the Emperor's side and also be able to disrupt the opposition. The forbidden courtyard of the imperial palace is completely within Zheng Liu's grasp, with no place to lay a hand on, as for the officials' side, it is also difficult to control and win over.

"His majesty is a profound person, difficult to predict, it is difficult to lay hands on such aspect." With a wave of his hand, lightly disagreeing with this strategy, Lou Che's eyes does not even blink as they stare at him.

"Others are unable to implement this strategy, but for Lord Prime Minister, it is not impossible." Shu Yu Tian speaks of it so leisurely, seeming to have everything thought out^[3], "May Lord Prime Minister first listen to two literary quotations."

"I am all ears."

"The first one, to endure hardships to accomplish ambitions in practice of eclipsing^[4], the story of offering a beauty to King Fu Chai of Wu and restoring the state; the second one, is Lu Bu Wei of the Qin state, with a song hostess marrying King of Qin and so on, the story of power tyranny in the web of court relations^[5]."

These two stories have long been overripe in his ears, even young children knows of them, Lou Che creases his brows, a chill carried within his smile, self-knowing projecting from within his eyes, "The beauty trap is of no use on his majesty." The matter of Consort Ying serving as a lesson, Zheng Liu is simply good at acting, and not actually one who is intoxicated in beauties.

"Perhaps Lord Prime Minister does not know, I have received word from within the palace, his majesty has ordered for the main hall of Jing Ye to be named Yin Yue Hall, and there was once a woman who lived within the hall for as long as half a year, his majesty's attitude towards this can be said to be of an extreme special case," Shu Yu Tuan abruptly stands up from his seat, kneeling on the ground, "This person, is Lord Prime Minister's Madam."

Because of this one phrase, the entire room falls into still silence, one can still hear the sound of cicadas outside the window, each little cry, pricking into one's heart, the originally still incomparably hot air, upon seeping into the study room actually carries a chill. Lou Sheng watches the person kneeling on the ground, face suddenly pales, suddenly reddens, sweat sliding down from his face onto the floor, carrying an incomparably abnormal silence. First turning his head to the side, looking at Lou Che, his face of gloomy chill, fingers tightly clenching around the fan, knuckles already white.

"You—want—to—die?" Lou Che grits his teeth as he spits the words out one by one, hand unconsciously exerting strength, restraining his monstrous fumes.

"Lord Prime Minister," Even if it has come to this point, Shu Yu Tian's voice is still as calm as before, his bowed head raises, facing Lou Che, "In terms of patience and endurance, his majesty undoubtedly stands above you, over time, Lord Prime Minister's power is bound to take a fall. Lord Prime Minister, Madam is a fatal soft burden to you, rather than having it this way, why not turn your greatest weakness into his majesty's soft burden, such disadvantage will be eliminated, this is but a great advantage to you ah! One woman, in exchange for the power to grasp hold of this world, is it not worth it?"

Such speech blurted out from his mouth, renders the entire study room silent, this unimaginably bold strategy clear and resounding, leaving all those within the room thunderstruck.

Hand stealthily gripping onto the sword handle by his side, Lou Sheng glares at Shu Yu Tian, his face cold and murderous, just waiting for Lou Che's one word of order, he shall immediately spring into action, making sure to have the one kneeling on the ground splatter his blood in all five directions.

Shu Yu Tian notices his killing intent, his kneeling posture remains absolutely unchanged, coldly glancing at Lou Sheng, with not a single move, he stares ahead, with calm demeanour, an appearance of complete certainty.

The air abnormally heavy and pressing, flowing with hot breathing, every

minute and second becomes very long, Lou Sheng hand tightly gripped onto the sword handle grows sweaty, but still hears not a single order from Lou Che, his heart hit with a chill, turns his head towards the person at the desk.

Never has he seen Lou Che like this before, such evident expression of dejection clearly displayed on the face, the nicely shaped eyebrows deeply knitted together, face slightly paled, even that elegant smile that is always displayed has disappeared without a trace, Lou Sheng was secretly afraid. Just when his doubts were uncertain, Lou Che closes his eyes, covering the deeply heavy pain within his eyes, acting like he is in deep thoughts, half leaning back against the chair.

Lou Sheng's hold on the sword handle can only loosen, in this incomparably stuffy and hot afternoon, the calling of cicadas can be constantly heard, all of this is just like an illusion, behinds such peace there lies battles, plotting, and all this once again makes this originally hot summer grow even more intensely heated, practically making people feel suffocated.

Exactly what is Lord Prime Minister who has both his eyes closed thinking?

Lou Sheng's mind is blank, within such haziness, he suddenly recalls many things that he originally should have forgotten, but is eventually lost amongst the memories of stories from the past.

He is one who followed Lou Che since the very beginning.

In his memories, back at the Crown Prince Estate, Lou Che was still a grown child no longer small, born with delicate and graceful handsome looks, eyes bright and clear like water, first time he saw him, he had even thought he is a gentleman of the Crown Prince Estate, only later did he find out he is but a freeloader, of lowly status.

But it is this frail youth, who diligently studied literary documents every day, such embodiment of perseverance even he this martial arts person could only sigh in acknowledgement of his own lacking compared to him. Ever since then, did he find, this good looking youth has the potential to become successful.

Listed as First Ranked Scholar at fifteen years old, practically becoming the phenomenon of the Capital City at the time.

A body of a young man, silk clothing jade hair crown, leaping body onto the horse, distinguished and admirable, glorious good looks.

When the flow of congratulating people came coming up to the doors, he finds that that youth has started to change, a smile hung on his face at all times, such smile like the spring breeze, the clearness in his eyes slowly fading away, replacing it is deepness like a quiet lake.

Becoming an official under the Crown Prince is but a matter of course, and he himself has become his person bodyguard, watching him step by step get closer to the heart of power, watching him transform from original nervousness into increasing sophistication.

Like a snowball growing bigger and bigger as he was drawing closer to power. Giving rise the Crown Prince's dread, even motivated him to kill, and that youth who had been involved in officialdom for two years was a step ahead in sensing the danger, acting decisively on the spot, turning to assist the Empress Dowager at the time, giving her advices and suggestions from behind the scenes. Once Crown Prince died of illness, Empress Dowager seizing all power, the youth had already transformed from a little chick into a soaring eagle.

With exceptionally keen insights, great courage holding no fear no dread, taking to lethal means between cheerful chatting and laughter, with astuteness and resourcefulness of devising strategies in a command tent......practically all conditions required to all successes, he has them all.

In such turbulent struggle, he even managed to take the first step before that sly old fox of an Empress Dowager, winning over the senior officials, pinning accusations, leading the imperial guards, eventually forcing the Empress Dowager to her death in Chong Hua Hall.

The dreariness of that scene back then, just like a vivid happening before his eyes, after the Empress Dowager drank down all the poisoned wine, bleeding out from all seven apertures within the hall, Lou Che step by step steps down from the hall, dampened blue robes, eyes like bright stars, carrying a posture of innate noble elegance, a touch of unknown meaning in his smile, disdainfully side eyeing the arrogance of all the officials, such shocking talent.

Once he regained his senses, he only just found that he himself has already

unconsciously kneeled down in the hall, it was also from that very moment, he loyally devotedly guarded this master, standing behind him, watching him rise higher and higher, standing above the clouds.

Power growing greater and greater, the original crystal clear youth was never to be seen again, waiting for so many years, finally meeting Madam, only deep within this garden, are there truly sincere smiles, could it be.....right now he has to once again abandon all this for power?

Officialdom like the sea, has no limits, exactly what direction will his master head into?

Memories like a tide, thoughts tumbling, Lou Sheng holds very deep feelings, clanking man suddenly gains an additional sound of a sigh, silently waiting for Lou Che's final decisions. (Clanking refers to the clanking noise of metal, referring to Lou Sheng as a man who only knows how to wave his sword around and fight).

Lou Che silent leans his back against the chair without a word, closing his eyes to think, cutting off all outside interference, Shu Yu Tian's every word has hit against his heart, constantly echoing.

The world.....

How much forms this word can take on. The power of one hand covering the skies, the ability to grasp hold of fate, all this is what he had vaguely looked forward to having. Nearly a decade of roaming the sea officialdom, time and time again brushing past death, this battle of the imperial court with no swords and blades visible, who knows how much more dangerous it is compared the fighting with all one's might on the battlefield.

Since the age of twenty, he understood how to protect himself, how to eliminate opponents, all types of means and resourcefulness honed through survival, became his instincts.

Everything he has today are all his personal gains, with no one else's help, even with people ridiculing him "sly as a fox, venomous as a snake" behind his back, he just turns a deaf ear, giving his all, to gain such attitude of looking down on the world in return.

And right now, all of this can possibly come to naught overnight.....

Zheng Liu, never did he know he hid it so deeply, whilst he was opposing the Crown Prince with full force, he must have been coldly observing from the side right? Such deep obscurity, truly makes Lou Che admire him from the bottom of his heart.

Imperial power, originally thinking it is already something he cannot reach for, today he is evenly matched with and is struggling for, and the one holding the imperial power, seems to have also fallen for Gui Wan.

Truly laughable to the extreme.....

He had long grown used to scheming, but never did he think, one day, Gui Wan would be dragged into the scheme, and he must also make a choice.

Mind endlessly replaying the journey he took on throughout these years. Within the Crown Prince Estate, he studied literary documents written by wise men day and night, outside in the courtyard, there is also a pond dyed blue from the rinsing of ink from his brushes, every day accompanied by books, learning how fight for power within such loneliness. Outside the imperial court, a very very long official road, he slowly walks past, seeing hundreds of officials lower their heads in bowing, every word every deed, deciding the movement of the imperial court.

Struggling for so many years, other than power, what else has he gained?

Suddenly opening his eyes, Lou Che looks out of the window, Lou Sheng and Shu Yu Tian were both surprised, simultaneously following his eyes in looking outside, the sky of cloudless blue, emerald green flickering in the garden, every spot flowing with the uniquely rich flavour of summer.

In a situation where no one else is able to sense anything out of the ordinary, Lou Che actually reveals a trace of faint smile, only he, seems to hear a burst of extremely pleasant laughter.

"No." The painful struggles expressed on his face completely vanishes, Lou Che lowers his head and looks at Shu Yu Tian, restoring his handsome elegance, within that seemingly warm and gentle voice, there actually carries firm rejection.

Shu Yu Tian completely freezes, seeming to have not expected such an outcome, "Lord Prime Minister, think over it again....." This great opportunity is hard to come by, in accordance to Lou Che's personality, he should not be rejecting this suggestion, why......

One wave of a hand stops him from speaking further, "Enough, you listen to me, let me hear such words again, then you shall not bother thinking of leaving this place alive."

Heart thunderstruck, Shu Yu Tian understands he is able to do as he says, heart not feeling resigned, still wanting to speak again, when Lou Sheng had already took two steps forward, completely blocking off his opportunity to speak. Sinking into silence for a while, he struggles repeatedly, lamenting, he could only give up.

The room turns quiet, Lou Che watches Lou Sheng half carry a threatening demeanour in "sending the guest" out the door, only he alone remains in the room.

Feeling somewhat irritated, even he himself cannot clearly tell, why he had flatly rejected Shu Yu Tian's suggestion just now, and can only attribute it to instincts, thinking that he cannot let Gui Wan remain in the Prime Minister Estate, he could not suppress the pain in his heart; thinking that he needs to send her beyond those tall red walls, his heart even more so felt like someone was twisting a knife into it.

The woman he dotes on, the woman he loves, how could he bear having her suffer the slightest grievance?

Forget it, forget it......

"Why still sitting there when you finished discussing?" The study room doors are pushed open, the ray of light follows in, Lou Che opens his eyes, amongst the radiant glow, he sees Gui Wan step in, her clear resonant voice giving him a sense of peace.

Raising his brows, before he could speak up, he sees Gui Wan walking into the room, carrying a sweet and elegant smile, heart missing a beat, words stuck in his throat, not a single sound uttered.

Heart like a clear mirror, he suddenly understands.

Monstrous power, one hand covering the sky.....in exchange, turns out he needs only her.....

One shallow smile ah.....

Walking out of the courtyard, Shu Yu Tian has a face of gloom, refusal to feel resigned, looking back at the Prime Minister Estate plaque, expression filled with complications. He slowly walks towards a horse carriage waiting around the corner from the Prime Minister Estate, hopping onto the carriage, having just sat himself down, yet to regretfully speak up, inside the carriage is already a person who is sitting cross legged, his posture strange, smiling towards him: "What's wrong? Looking at your face, seems to be very regretful......"

"Lou Che is originally a trickery talent, who knew he would also be so blockheaded," Shu Yu Tian looks at the other person, continuing to say, "Unfortunate, really unfortunate....."

"Unfortunate? What's unfortunate?"

"Unfortunate his failure is already showing, looks like this side of mine is also going to lose."

The person in the carriage could not hold back from bursting out in laughter, after half a day did he hold back his laughing: "No need to haste, Yu Hai's side also does not seem to be going smooth, be it win or lose, it is not yet conclusive. Besides, so what if you two lose or win, in the end, the final victor is the entire clan."

Shu Yu Tian's face gradually eases down, recalling the scene back in the Prime Minister Estate just now, he lightly sounds a sigh, not saying anymore.

The horse carriage heads west, amongst the afterglow of the sunset, it gradually disappears.....

In heaven's recording of the fourth year, in the occasion of early autumn, the inner imperial court is swept into endless storms, although it is no big matter that greatly impacts the situation, trivial matters are coming one after another,

struggles between factions are intensifying the longer it drags on, even the ordinary commoners of the Capital City can somewhat smell it in the air.

At the end of august, a little known low ranked official of the Hanlin Academy (an imperial academy), suddenly petitioned to impeach the Minister of Revenue. In the memorial to the throne, he clearly and precisely points out that the Minister of Revenue having been an official for many years, has been taking bribes and bending the law, abusing power for personal gains, even all of Minister of Revenue's entry accounts have been marked clearly, just like looking at the original copy. Also grieving that should such officials not be eliminated, it is difficult as a civilian to overcome such difficulty and respect the laws of the imperial court, all that was written in the memorial to the throne, was written in sharp cutting strokes, full of feelings. It was on the very next day, the Emperor although did not clearly speak of it, but already has the meaning to charge such offense. The current Grand Secretary of the imperial court, Prime Minister Lou declined to comment.

On the next day, another official under the ministry of labour impeached that low ranked official of the Hanlin Academy, pointing out that during his time in the Hanlin Academy, the history book recordings of the late emperor were written with ill intent, with the treacherous intention to profane the late emperor. All of a sudden, the low ranked official of the Hanlin Academy turned from being the original prosecutor to being the accused. Amongst the imperial court, the two factions engaged in endless disputes.

This matter opened up the prelude to the battles of factions in the heaven's recording of the fourth year, later recorded in history as "Hanlin Petition". A historian of a later generation had pointed out, this matter merely pulled out the past few years of small scale struggles between the two factions onto the main stage, at the same time, it is also the first time the Emperor and Lou Che directly went head to head in confrontation, both having the means of probing at each other. And that low ranked official of the Hanlin Academy and the ministry of labour official, merely opened up the path to this confrontation stage.

The Prime Minister Estate is still the same, red maple leaves fluttering down as

they descend.

Ever since that secret talk, Lou Che stood on higher alert towards Shu Yu Tian, but did not act upon it, there is only one reason for this, to separate energy and manpower right now in order to deal with Shu Yu Tian, is an extremely unwise course of action, it will directly affect the capabilities and strength of the Prime Minister Estate, moreover, it is easy to deal with Shu Yu Tian, but to eradicate the stable foundation of the Shu Clan in the southern area is no easy task.

At the same time, he has grown extremely doubtful of the Shu Clan. Matters of the back courtyard in the imperial palace, ever since Zheng Liu personally took charge, it is extremely difficult to gain intelligence, and the matter that Shu Yu Tian mentioned in the study room, clearly shows he is well notified of matters within the palace. Could it be that he also has an insider in the palace?

Maintaining countenance as he continues to use the Shu Clan, Lou Che appears extremely careful, secretly wary of the movements of all parties, taking methodical steps in carrying out deployment, waiting for the storms of the imperial court to come.

The situation in the imperial court is already like rising winds foreboding the storm to come. In the Lou Estate, officials comes and goes in discussions, hectic with tensions running high; and within the inner courtyard, it is still filled with joyful chatting and laughing, unaware of the worries.

In the inner courtyard, the maids and servants are lit with smiles as usual, having not experienced hardships before, they firmly believe, as long as Lou Che is here, the Prime Minister Estate's skies will not fall down.

- [1] The original phrase for **straight to the point** is **kāi mén jiàn shān /** 开门见山 literally translated as **opening the doors to see the view of the mountains.**
- [2] To take away the firewood from under the cauldron or fǔ dǐ chōu xīn /釜 底抽薪 the Chinese equivalent of the phrase is to cut the ground from under one's foot.
- [3] The proverb used for having everything planned/thought out is called chéng zhú zài xiōng / 成竹在胸 which literally translates to having a complete [image of] of bamboo embedded in one's chest (heart) before painting

bamboo, the image of bamboo is already in one's heart.

- [4] First of all the **practice of eclipse** means **to lose oneself for a while before bathing in glory again**, like how the sun is hidden behind the moon. Whilst **to endure hardships to accomplish ambitions** or **wò xīn cháng dǎn /** 卧薪尝胆一literally translating to **sleeping on firewood, tasting the gall** is a proverb that derives from the story of a King Goujian of Yue who deliberately put himself through the hardship of sleeping on firewood and tasting gall every day in order to remember the humiliations of serving under the enemy state, the state of Wu ruled by King Fu Chai, after persevering with this for many years, he later wipes out the Wu state, successfully gaining his revenge.
- [5] The Lu Bu Wei story involves a complicated web of treachery, centring around a song hostess called Lady Zhao who was Lu Bu Wei's concubine but later becomes the king of Qin's consort (and subsequently the Empress Dowager), under the scheming of Lu Bu Wei she also gains a lover called Lao Ai who is disguised as an eunuch. With Lao Ai, she gave birth to an illegitimate son and schemed to have him succeed the throne, which was found out by the emperor, leading to Lao Ai launching a revolt, ending in failure.

Full



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Blizzard In The Capital

One hand lightly propping up her cheek, one hand holding a book, Gui Wan passes time in a bored manner. The doors makes a "gazhi" sound, she raises her head, Ling Long pushes the door opens and enters, footsteps seeming a little hurried, walking up to the low table, half lowering her body, whispering into Gui Wan's ear.

"De Yu gong-gong?" Speaking with slight surprise, Gui Wan places the book aside, looking towards the doors, she deeply ponders. The Head Eunuch within the palace is requesting an audience outside the courtyard right now?

Nodding at Ling Long, seeing her leave the room in very hasty steps, Gui Wan braces herself, standing up, she gazes out of the window. These days, the inner courtyard of the Prime Minister Estate is as calm as ever, only the calm and joys of the servants in this courtyard is real, hers is actually half real, half fake, she understands that muddled thoughts are mixed within, only by being like this, is she able to spend day after day under the dark waves.

De Yu coming right now, what matter could it be for?

"Madam." This refined and polite voice is the same as always.

Thoughts drifting too far, Gui Wan turns around, a person is already standing by the doors, of tall and slender stature, in a long royal blue robe, thin autumn air hung on the body, looking just like a gentleman from generations of a scholarly family, how is anyone to tell he is actually the current fair-headed one within the palace?

Upon a closer look, he may be containing a smile as he stands there, but that face is slightly pale, worries hanging between his brows.

"Gong-gong....." Gui Wan firstly sits beside the low table, Ling Long is nimble minded, and had already brought a seat over from the side, allowing De Yu to sit down, before his body is steadied, a cup of green tea with clean air overflowing, entangled with a shallow fragrance, is already handed over next to De Yu's hand.

De Yu accepts the hot tea, but his lips does not touch it, with a turn of his arm, he places it back onto the low table, slightly lowering his head, appearing to want to speak but finds it difficult to open his mouth. After a long while, finally unable to resist this exceptional silence, parting his lips, hoarseness carried under his voice: "Madam, do you by chance know of the Shu Clan?"

Again with the "Shu Clan"..... "What makes gong-gong interested in this prominent family from the south?" Not answering and questions back, probing at De Yu's underlying tone.

Shaking his head, taking the tea, he downs it all in one, after clearing his throat, De Yu finally speaks: "Perhaps Madam is not aware, the formidability of this Shu Clan," Speaking up to here, perhaps he does not know how to describe it properly, he pauses for a moment, attracting the doubtful looks in Gui Wan's eyes, organising his thoughts, he continues to speak: "His majesty has once left the palace for a day, it was precisely on the day of the herbaceous peony flower fair in the Prime Minister Estate, only returning to the palace at sunset, following him back, was also an additional person. His majesty summoned him to talk for an entire day, ever since then, this person has been secretly suggesting schemes for his majesty, should there be tasks that his majesty cannot do himself, it will be done by lending this person's hand. His presence elusive, even gaining his majesty's amnesty, I spent a great amount of time before I was able to discover,

he is a descendant of the Shu Clan, heard he is called Shu Yu Hai."

Hearing this name, Gui Wan's heart is overcome with a chill, knitting her brows, "Shu Yu Hai?"

The descendants of the Shu Clan, one in the Prime Minister Estate, one in the imperial palace, conducts tasks stealthily, the deep meaning behind this unpredictable, look like it is their ambitious hearts thriving, coming here prepared. Lou Che should have picked out this point, the Emperor is no idiot either, just that the stakes at play here are unclearly intertwined, they both want to make use of the Shu Clan, occupying such high positions, there are many things to let go of because of this, to have the Shu Clan, those shady dealings that are not to be known to others, can be done with the lending of their hands.

One person's capabilities has its limits, an entire clan's capabilities is infinite.

"Gong-gong coming here today, is it because of this Shu Clan matter?"

De Yu lifts his eyes, suddenly springing up from the chair, with a "putong" sound, he was kneeling before Gui Wan, across the low table, Gui Wan was slightly surprised, hastily standing up herself, wanting to reach out to help him up, but was pressed back with those deeply heavy eyes. De Yu's expression reveals solemnity, bleak and chilly from a distance, upon closer inspection, it is practically weighed down with a huge boulder, hundreds and thousands of pounds heavy.

"Madam, it is all my fault, failing to discipline the little eunuch's mouth to be sealed tight enough, disclosing your matters to Shu Yu Tian, this Shu Clan is cunning, heart set on seeking power, I am only afraid they will turn their attention towards you, after thinking it over and over again, I just keep feeling this is not right, thus specially coming here today to confess my sin." Once his words were spoken, he lowers his body, kneeling before the low table without producing a sound. The Shu Clan's movements are much quicker than he has imagined, Shu Yu Tian directly speaking to Lou Che is already a matter that happened a few days ago, this point, De Yu naturally does not know of."

Gui Wan was firstly a little shocked, and then leisurely smiles, "Gong-gong needs not be like this, this world holds so many sets of lips, one cannot manage them all, a little eunuch's mistake, has nothing to do with gong-gong." Sending

an eye signal to Ling Long, Ling Long immediately steps forward to help De Yu up.

Who knew De Yu would continue to kneel there without the slightest intention to move, only bitterly smiling. Due to the loneliness of being alone in the palace, he wanted to dispel such feeling without much thought, one day, after getting drunk, he had let slip a few matters concerning the Emperor and Gui Wan, this was all heard by a little eunuch, only then did the information happen to be leaked to Shu Yu Hai. After this, he fell under immense regret, although secretly sending the little eunuch who leaked the information to his death, he cannot possibly recover an established fact. Unfortunately these words, he could only simmer in his heart, how could he possibly dare to tell Gui Wan this?

Seeing him kneel on the ground, unwilling to get up, Gui Wan also felt she committed wrong, it was her who single-handedly pulled De Yu into this complicated vortex, causing him to act in spite of himself, following her through the ups and downs, right now, for the sake of her benefits and her safety, he has actually come here to ask for forgiveness, how could this possibly not shake her heart? Actually finding herself speechless in this precise moment, after a while, Gui Wan stands in front of De Yu's body, lowering her body to pull up his arm, "Gong-gong, exactly is it I who owe you more, or is it you who owe me more? You kneeling here like this, is it to make things clear between us?"

De Yu was slightly stunned, and only then did he stand up, lifting the huge rock from his heart, worries alleviating, taking a few steps back, glancing towards Gui Wan a few times, after a while, the tea has gradually cooled down, he speaks up: "Madam, may you pay more heed towards the Shu Clan, I am unable to stay any longer, and shall be taking my leave now."

Knowing that he holds a special identity, indeed inconvenience for him to be staying here, Gui Wan nods her head, watching him respectfully bow towards her, the very moment he turned around, she could not hold back from calling out: "De Yu gong-gong."

"Madam has other commands?"

"Did gong-gong secretly slip out of the palace today?"

Hearing those words, De Yu's body slight freezes, warm currents running

through the passages to his heart, knowing this phrase of Gui Wan's is spoken in concern towards his safety, afraid that he will attract troubles due to leaving the palace without permission, with his back facing Gui Wan, he is still able to see, right now, her shallow smile like the curve of the new moon, eyes like the night, hiding the intoxicating effect of alcohol, brilliant like the stars.

"May Madam rest assured, leaving the palace today is for official business, there will not be any blunders." Without turning his head back, he throws aside these words, and leaves just like that, just like how he came, grazing into the twilight, Ling Long hastily follows after him. Right now, not one of them knew, De Yu's secret visit today, will be the last time he sees Gui Wan, leaving without turning his head back like this, in later days, actually became a regret.

Waiting till that figure completely disappears from sight, Gui Wa withdraws her line of sight, sitting back in her original spot, heart feeling a little uneasy, she stands up, pacing back and forth in the room two times, yet the unease in her heart grew increasingly heavy. Looking ahead into the future and thinking back to the past, he carefully thinks, sounding a soft sigh, she takes hold of a brush, writing two letters on the low table.

The first letter, is written to San Niang, the letter ordering for her to keep a close eye on the southern Shu Clan, should the Shu Clan have any movements that targets the Prime Minister Estate, may San Niang overcome the Shu Clan with all her might.

The second letter, is written to her older brother Yu Yan He, Jin Yang is very close to the foundations of the southern Shu Clan, in the letter, Gui Wan requests her older brother, when the Shu Clan's power grows too large, without any hesitation, to directly press forward into the enemy's lair, it is of utmost importance to eradicate the Shu family.

At this time, Gui Wan has already seen through the Shu family's cunning means, wanting to gain advantage in between the dispute between the Emperor and Lou Che, using this opportunity, to form a stepping stone for the clan to stand above.

The dispute between the Emperor and Lou Che, she hides her understanding and acts like the fool, because this is a men's world, this round of disputes, does

not allow for others to intervene. She can only silently accompany Lou Che, in his spare time, a game of chess, a cup of tea, clear breeze widespread, accompanying her husband with a graceful smile.

Under this calm surface, she does not allow for anyone to obstruct or even harm the Prime Minister Estate's interests from the shadows, even if she only sees a little warning sign, she must still seize and eliminate the dangers before it occurs.

Looking at the letters, ink yet to completely dry, she gently folds them, placing them into the envelope, holding it to the side of the candle, she watches as the candle wax drip by drip seals the opening, her anxiety, her melancholy, also seems to have been sealed within the hot wax.

Even if Gui Wan is this bright and intelligent, she would not have imagined, these two letters were still a step too late.

The changes through history will never come to a pause, even if one is to exhaust every scheme in their mind, with the lack of right timing and right location, in the end, it will only be greatly difficult to succeed. Just one light scribble of words in history, will bring endless poignancy and helplessness, and just how many pairs of naked eyes are slowly brewing such efforts that will always remain inferior, be it the loyalty of De Yu's unannounced visit, the scheming of Gui Wan's letters at night, or the composition of Lou Che's mapped out strategies......

In the heaven's recording of the fourth year, during mid-autumn, the luminance of the moonlight spills across the entire land, it was at the same time Gui Wan's letters were sent out of the Prime Minister Estate, did a major event that will later change the outcome of this political dispute take place elsewhere.

Heaven's recording of the fourth year, late fall, below Xia Xiang City Gates.

As night falls, the dark skies lightless, wind howling past, bringing a rustling chill, a man dressed in thick layers of silk clothing stands at the city gates, his shivering body make a turn with every few pacing, constantly rubbing his hands, as he occasionally hazes out towards the main road, faint white breath visible as he exhales.

"Lord Advisor, they're coming, they're coming!" Slightly weak and dim light quickly approaches, a city gate guarding soldier jogs up, the lantern in hand flickering, such sight appearing distantly void and unreal within the darkness.

Hearing the little soldier's words, the advisor's spirits were lifted, straightening his body, gaze locked in front. Sure enough, shortly after, the sound of rumbling carriage can be heard approaching, he heads straight to the bottom of the city gate in waiting. The advisor hurriedly walks forward in welcome, bowing his body, "Your honour, you had made a long journey."

"Advisor Zhang, during the time I was away, was everything fine in the city?" The curtains are lifted, a slightly plump figure hops off the carriage with the support of the soldier, fur coat wrapping the body, face filled with signs of fatigue, right hand rubbing at his sore neck, left hand holding a box made from pear wood.

"Your honour, all has been well."

"En." As the governor of Xia Xiang, his first phrase is but customary words. Xia Xiang is a wealthy town in the southern area, a peaceful and happy society, he would not think that anything big will happen here, he vaguely sounds a reply, stepping off the carriage, he instantly senses the biting chill, muttering: "The weather this year really is unusual, already this cold at this time."

The little city gate guarding soldier goes to park up the horse carriage, the advisor closely following after the governor, lightly asking: "Your honour, meeting with Prime Minister Lou this time you entered the Capital, is presumably a great gain?"

"En, the matter is urgent, tensions are running high during this time in the Capital, Lord Prime Minister's side is hastening to press on." Towards his own trusted advisor, the governor sees that no one is around, and speaks frankly, "Lord Prime Minister wants the southern region to join hands and form a unanimous opposition, then the central academy plans will be unsuccessful, if we let his majesty successfully establish the central academy, only using those close ministers, then what good will we still be able to reap? You see, this is Lord Prime Minister's handwritten letters, wait till tomorrow morning, before we give it to the other ministers to look over." A chubby hand lightly patting the box, the

governor was somewhat proud.

He is one of Lou Che's most trusted official in the southern region, gaining deeply high regards, close to the south, thus serving under Prince of Nan Jun, and under Lou Che's care in the Capital, in recent years, has helped Lou Che consolidate southern forces, thus gaining a lot of merit, flushed with success, prospering in officialdom, naturally of a wide and fat body figure, upon smiling, the meat on his cheeks will even tremble.

"Your honour is wise, the day Prime Minister Lou alone gains all power, shall be the day your honour soar into the skies, this little one will require a lot of guidance and help from you ah." Lips filled with compliments, the advisor and governor sharing knowing smiles.

The two people head towards city gates, the governor rambling about things he has encountered in the Capital: "Must say that this Capital City is better than Xia Xiang in all aspects, but the beauties of this Capital City ah, not gentle enough, how could they compare to the grace and passion of Xia Xiang women ah?" Words coming to a pause, he sees that the advisor is eagerly listening in, and once again speaks, "Having said that, there is one exception— Prime Minister Lou's madam, that is but a dear little lamb ah.....a peerless beauty, but only such beautiful woman, is able to match up to Prime Minister Lou ah." Catching that one glimpse in the courtyard that day, separated with too big of distance, he had not even managed to get a clear look of what Madam Lou looks like, but that elegance of hibiscus containing dew, even if that figure stood amongst the clusters of flowers, it still made people feel bedazzled, a stunning glimpse, difficult to forget.

The two people chatting and laughing, walking past the city gates, the advisor looks back, about to order the soldiers to close the gates, when a burst of hurried horse hooves rapidly approaches, the soldiers stops what they are doing, advisor and governor turning around, eyes met with only the rising of dust, and one galloping horse arrives below the city gates, within the darkness, the dim lantern is unable to clearly light up the person on the horse.

"Who is Governor of Xia Xiang, Prime Minister Lou has a message." The person on the horse loudly shouts out.

The governor is stunned, he had only just arrived himself, and behind Prime Minister Lou's messenger follows after, could there be new instructions? Not daring to display the slightest neglect, he walks up front, "What does Lord Prime Minister has to instruct?" Seeing the person on the horse beckon him forward, he knows it must be a secret message, cannot be heard by others. Nervously smiling as he approaches, the person on the horse immediately dismounts, leaning towards him; the governor's mouth drops, raising his head to take a close look of the person, his face instantly pales: "You—"

The advisor waits by the side of the city gates, watching the governor slowly walk over, speaking in private with that messenger, body is even shaking, seeming to be laughing. His body shrinks back, patiently waiting, but after waiting for a while, the governor is still maintaining that posture, heart hit with a chill, he jumps up in anxiety, just about to shout out, but suddenly sees that the governor's body is already slowly falling, the messenger squats down, taking the pear wood box from the governor's hands. The advisor's heart rapidly beats, deep within this dark night, he seems to be able to hear his own heartbeat, pointing towards the governor's location, he loudly cries out: "Assassin, an assassin—"

The two city guarding soldiers upon hearing his cries, pulls out the swords from their waist side, unfortunately it is too late now, the messenger is as quick as lightning, the soldiers did not even manage to see his face, and had already died under his dagger. The advisor witnesses the entire scene, voice stuck in his throat, unable to utter a sound, legs turning numb, he kneels before the city gates, to no avail, his eyes is met with a flash of light......

The next day, news of the "Governor of Xia Xiang's Murder Case" that thunderstruck the six provinces of the southern region, quickly made its way into the Capital City, a total of seven lives including the governor and horse groomers, not a single person survived, and this round of assassination, is but only the fewest number of deaths amongst the murder cases of officials from the southern region. During this same period, the crucial power holders of Xun Zhou, Hong Tong were successively killed. The biggest sacrifice being Governor of Xun Zhou's entire family, thirty four lives, wiped out in one night.

And these three officials, are all powerful assistants of Lou Che's from the

southern region. This round of assassinations that thunderstruck the southern region, still yet to be solved twenty years later, whenever the commoners mentions this round of assassination, there is still lingering fear.

Dark clouds lay low, clear blue covered in boundless ash, the gloomy sky a misty grey, the northern wind picking up, only sensing prickling pain as it scrapes past the face.

Lou Che walks out of the study room, ink coloured cross collar robe complemented with black sable fur, ink green python patterned boots stepping along the light grey brick path as it produces rustling sounds, coming up to the crescent doorway, he hears Lou Sheng and the housekeeper discuss something from afar, taking a few steps closer, Lou Sheng turns towards him, expression looking even gloomier than this weather, he bows his head as he says: "Lord Prime Minister." The housekeeper also bows after him.

Lou Che sees the nervousness revealed within their expressions, and is able to guess what they were discussing just now, only acting like he does not know right now, "Has preparations been made as I had instructed a few days ago?"

The housekeeper says nothing, Lou Sheng nods his head, "Yes, all preparation have been made, but Lord Prime Minister, doing this....."

"Enough." Cutting off his words, Lou Che appears slightly impatient, his control over the southern region already falls far short from before, the killing of the three governors, has crushed his past few years of great efforts, today, the situation no longer allows for him to hesitate. The tip of nose suddenly senses cold, he raises his head, the sombre sky is actually filled with floating snow, thinly, slowly drifting in the air, the pavilion tower of the Prime Minister Estate is originally of exquisite craftsmanship, to be dyed in snow right now, bright and clear, such beautiful scenery it forms, really is heart moving.

"Lord Prime Minister," Taking advantage of such occasion wherein he has drifted into a daze, Lou Sheng walks forward, a pair of hands lifting an object, "The day before yesterday, General Lin Estate's sent this here, said to hand it to Lord Prime Minister or Madam, seeing Lord Prime Minister troubled yesterday, so....."

Accepting the object Lou Sheng was holding up, it is a letter and a lustrous jade that wins over the snow by a few points, Lou Che sinks into deep thoughts, opening up the envelop, inside there is no letter, only a note tucked inside, opening it, only two words: one year. Turning it over and over again, looking over the note over and over again, but is still only able to see those two words, Lou Che lightly creases his brows, unable to make out the meaning behind it, then looking at the piece of jade, ideally carved patterns, The Lin [林] character in middle, it is clearly the warrant pendant of the Lin Estate. Carefully thinking over it, Lou Che places the warrant pendant into his sleeve, his face expressionless.

The housekeeper advices from the side: "The snow is getting heavy, standing here too long will harm the body."

Not caring for the housekeeper and Lou Sheng's persuasions, quietly standing in the courtyard, up until the entire courtyard was blanketed in a layer of glittering white, did he leisurely say: "Gui Wan will definitely like this scenery." Not waiting for Lou Sheng and the housekeeper to respond, he walks towards the bedchamber in the inner courtyard, with big strides, "Go prepare now, set off in two hours." The housekeeper face is pale, Lou Sheng lowers his head without a word.

Every scene and every little thing within this Prime Minister Estate are all able to hold prolonged appreciation, seeing them in the eyes today, feels even more easy on the eye, Lou Che walks all the way here, quietly pushing open the doors, beyond the ajar doors, Gui Wan lies on the long chair, the room filled with cosy warmth, stood in the centre is a charcoal brazier, producing crackling sounds, fumes curling out of the incense burner, the light fragrance like orchids wafting into the nose, entering the room with light steps, he closes the doors, sitting at the rear end of the settee, quietly admiring Gui Wan's sleeping beauty.

There is an old saying, a beauty's spring sleep like haitang (Chinese crabapple blossom), yet his Gui Wan actually wins over haitang by several points, because the warmth inside the room, her skin reveals a clear baby-like texture, cheeks rosy red, such tranquil sleeping, just like Guan Yin (a Bodhisattva, known as the Goddess of Mercy).

Even if he were to spend his entire life accompanying this sleeping beauty, he

will not grow sick of it, looking at her lovingly, time came to a standstill, tender warmth suddenly overflowing, Lou Che strokes her, such fine and smooth feeling under his fingertips, his heart makes a swing, the charcoal fire suddenly lightly sounds in the quiet room, shocking him back into his senses, toughening his heart, he gently shakes Gui Wan's shoulder, watching her slowly awaken from her sweet slumber, opening her eyes, eyes appearing misty due to her deep sleep, facing Lou Che, she reveals a smile: "Husband."

Lightly pinching her cheeks in a doting manner, Lou Che teases: "Look at you, how is this the appearance of the Prime Minister Madam?"

Neatening her collar, combing her hair behind her ear, Gui Wan's elegant smile like chrysanthemums, "Husband, how is this the appearance of the Prime Minister?"

Thinking of how when in front of her, he indeed has not the slightest dignified and strict demeanor, Lou Che was momentarily speechless, seeing that she has yet to apply any powder, bright like the clear moon, long hair flowing, revealing a moist glow, he pulls her into his embrace, hand stroking her hair, unimaginably silky, not at all any less than the brocade fabric of Jiang Nan. A thought suddenly popping up in his head, he takes her hand, leading her to the dressing table.

Gui Wan sees him take hold of the bone comb, she says in surprise: "Husband?"

Simplified Chinese 简体字	Traditional Chinese 楷书	Cursive Script 草书	Clerical Script 隶书	Lesser Seal Script 小篆	
Jiǎntǐzì	Kăishū	<u>Cǎo</u> shū	<u>Lì</u> shū	Xiǎo <u>zhuàn</u>	
人	,	4	人	R	
女	女	do	*	Ŕ	
耳	耳	7	耳	Ą	
马	馬	3	馬	易	
鱼	魚	鱼	魚	魚	
Щ	山	v	L	W	
日	日	12		0	
月	月	B	月	P	
雨	雨	か	雨	雨	
云	雲	なる	雪	零	,

"Watch me comb up a beautiful hairstyle for

you." His hand is able to paint mountains, water, fishes, insects, able to bring to life, cao, li, zhuan, how could this little task of combing hair possibly stump him? (căo, lì, zhuàn – different calligraphy styles)

Amused by his words, Gui Wan leaves him to it, Lou Che's hands are slender and very fair, so rare amongst men, it makes them all the more attractive, with the comb in his hand right now, it looks just like a little magic trick, after a moment of time, he was able to comb up a bun, simple and elegant. He looks around, picking up a hair pin, comparing it against her hair, but finds it too common, in the end he only picks up a silver hair pin and inserts it into the hair, matched with Gui Wan's brows like an ink painting, light frown, shallow smile, all complementing each other.

Gazing at Gui Wan, Lou Che suddenly falls into a daze, his Gui Wan, is always faintly smiling, when the smile thickens, little dimples shallowly emerges on her cheeks, like the first appearance of day, also like clearing clouds revealing the sun; her pupils faintly distant, crystal clear at first glance, a deep pit upon a closer look, exhibiting the influence of extraordinary splendour.

His Gui Wan.....

"Husband?" The sudden stop in hand movements alerts her, his expression unclear, Gui Wan stretches her neck, until she is able to look deep into those dark orbs, "What's wrong?"

The softest spot of tenderness in his heart soars up, Lou Che grabs hold of her hands, "Gui Wan, you leave the Capital first, go up north."

Hearing him speak like this, her heart is hit with a chill, Gui Wan dumbly stares at him, already understanding the meaning behind his words, can the situation no longer be delayed to this extent?

"No," Persistent in refusing, "I am not leaving here."

"Gui Wan, listen, you temporarily leave, no matter whether I succeed or not, I will still come pick you up. I heard there is a place in the northern region, is Qi Ling and the Nu Tribe's trading land, calm and peaceful, is a great place to live in seclusion, you go wait three months for me there, in future we will be together day and night, is this not the life you wanted most?" Earnestly^[1] persuading, Lou Che's calm voice has the ability to thoroughly convince people.

Only Gui Wan, is not affected in the slightest, "No, I want to stay here." Back then we agreed to share good fortune and misfortune alike.....

"Gui Wan," A stern voice escaping his lips, even Lou Che was stunned, when has he ever spoken to her with such authoritative sternness? "You staying here, I will definitely lose, only if you leave this land of rights and wrong, will I feel at ease." Should he have to battle it out in future, the Prime Minister Estate besieged, he dares not imagine what the outcome will be like, his only concern is Gui Wan, only by keeping her protected, would he be able to take a plunge.

Shining eyes looking into his, other than the overflowing affection, she sees nothing else, Gui Wan's nose is hit with a sour feeling, her insides spinning, only feeling like her heart is clogged with thousands of knots, also like insects gnawing at it, sensing a twist in her heart, tears surges up, rolling around in her eyes, but refuses to fall, she bites down on the bottom lip to the point of whitening, suddenly spotting red, her lip had been cut from the biting. Lips turning scarlet, such sight shocking Lou Che's heart.

"Don't cry, I naturally have a way to completely retreat, the secret passage in the imperial palace, has been personally passed down from the late Empress Dowager, even if it is the current Emperor, he will not be as familiar to it as I, three months, give me three months' time....."

The windows in the room all tightly closed, Gui Wan stilly falls into a trance as she looks at Lou Che, thousands of feelings flying past in her heart, yet her mind is completely blank, heart wrenching in pain, never did she think she would have to face this type of scenario, until she is directly standing face to face with it right now, nor does she knows whether it is regret or hate in her heart.

"Lord Prime Minister, Madam, all has been prepared." Lou Sheng's voice sounds from outside the room, the two people inside the room remains silent.

Hand tightening, Gui Wan is pulled up by Lou Che, she panics, wanting to speak up, Lou Che's face turns ashen as he takes the snow ferret fur cloak, tightly wrapping it around Gui Wan's body, eyes containing severity that allows for no refusal.

The two of them opens the doors and walks outside, the entire sky filled with fluttering snow, glittering white covering the land, creating a realm of pureness within the world. Lou Sheng, the housekeeper, Ling Long, Ru Qing, Ru Ming queued up in waiting within the courtyard, because they have been waiting for a

long time, every person is covered in a layer of frost.

Snowflakes descending, melting as it comes in touch with the face, not knowing whether it is snow or tears rolling down, Gui Wan is pulled into the middle of the courtyard by Lou Che, the man who usually dotingly lets her have her way with all matters, is abnormally resolute today. Her body not feeling cold at all, yet the chill in her heart is even icier than the snow, her vision blurred, not knowing what she is looking at.

This year's snowfall has come so early......

Under the surrounding of the everyone present, she silently walks to the main doors of the Prime Minister Estate, three sets of carriages are parked on the roadside. Gui Wan upon seeing this, shrinks back her body, unwilling to take another step forward. Lou Che turns his face, amongst the descending of snowflakes, he too is finding it difficult to conceal an entire face of pained expression. One arm tightly wrapped around Gui Wan's waist, he forcibly leads her out, deliberately not looking at her sorrowful face.

"Husband....." In front of the horse carriage, Gui Wan tightly grabs hold of Lou Che's hand, unwilling to let go, clearly aware that her leave to him, is the solution to his future worries, yet her hands are very loyal in investing her feelings. A heart breaking sound of soft calling, can only cry out the bitterness from the bottom of her heart, how could she possibly still hold it back? The tears come pouring down, voice choked back with sobs.

Lifting Gui Wan onto the middle carriage, the two people, ten fingers interlaced, tightly closed without the slightest gap, Lou Che removes Gui Wan's hand one finger by one finger, that stiffened face loosens upon seeing Gui Wan's tear filled face, heart achingly cupping her ice cold face, but then feels those hot tears scalding his hand.

"Gui Wan, don't be afraid, three months, I will definitely come pick you up. Don't cry anymore." With the increasing amount of tears in his hand, his heart starts to panic. How could he bear to see her shed tears, to him, her tears is the greatest punishment.

Barely managing to control herself, Gui Wan locks her eyes onto him, "Don't let me down....." Don't let down your promise, three months is but a short

moment, but in this life, it goes hand in hand with her life and death.

Hooking up his lips, revealing a handsomely clear smile, Lou Che firmly nods his head, the snowflakes dances in the air, sometimes spinning, sometimes turning, falling on the shoulders, hands, hair, Lou Che takes out a white lustrous jade warrant pendant, stuffing it into Gui Wan's hand, reminding: "This you can use on your way there." The northern area is the territory of the Lin military family, compared to the Lou Estate's warrant pendant, this is more of use.

The snowfall grows more vigorous, Gui Wan's eyes blurs, wanting to grab onto Lou Che's hand again, but he had already taken it back, with a turn of the head, he begins to command the others to set off.

"Husband——"

Deliberately neglecting Gui Wan's calling, only afraid his heart will soften up, and no longer will he be able to bear sending her away. Ordering for everyone to get on the horse carriage, Ru Qing, Ru Ming in one, Ling Long in one, amongst the three carriages, only Gui Wan's carriage is heading north, the other two carriages are used to divert the enemy's attention.

Lou Sheng walks up, Lou Che does not set any commands, only faintly looking at him, amongst the heavy snow, that scar also seems to have blurred, Lou Sheng also says nothing, solemnly nodding. Having been master and servant for over a decade, he naturally knows what Lou Che has entrusted him to, he silently nods, wordlessly telling Lou Che, he will protect Madam with his life.

Raising his head to face the sky, the vast grey sky, white snow overflowing, Lou Che no longer looks back, only standing there alone, listening to the sound of the carriage wheels, in his eyes, there is just a scene of white, only when his ears hear the horse carriages leave afar, does he turn his head, the tracks left behind on this plain white ground, leading far off into the distance.

He silently stands in front of the main doors of the Prime Minister Estate, only the plaque with the two red painted characters of "Prime Minister Estate" [相 府] seems to show no change, crimson red revealing solemnity and heaviness.

In the heaven's recording of the fourth year, early winter, Lou Che's wife leaves the Capital, on the day of leaving, a sudden blizzard hits the Capital City.....

[1] The original proverb used to refer to earnest is kǔ kǒu pó xīn / 苦口婆心 which literally translates to toughly spoken words from the old lady's heart, the toughly spoken words refers to patience and repeated persuasion, whilst the old lady's heart represent great kindness and goodwill. So the phrase itself is used to refer to someone who sincerely and patiently persuades through repeated attempts.

[Additional Note] the original words used for **Capital** in the chapter title is actually **jīng jī /** 京畿 which is what you would call the **capital city and its surrounding territory**, but to stop the chapter title from getting unnecessarily long, I just stuck with using Capital.

Ok, so now we are brought back to where we were left off in the intro chapter, and although Gui Wan leaving the Capital wasn't a badass move on her part like we were originally led to believe, thinking she would abandon her husband or something, well that's what I thought at least, it is still a good deed on Lou Che's part in wanting to keep his wife safe and sound...the only question is can everything work out as they had hoped?

Anyways, Lou Che sort of disappears for now, whilst everyone's favourite General shall be making a return in the next chapter. At the same time, we are gradually coming up to the end of the book with five/six chapters left, and I am hoping to speed up updates with the goal of finishing before Christmas

Part 1

Ok I am not liking this wordpress update, what is even going on??? I'm so confused~ please at least restore the old image edit >.<



CHAPTER THIRTY

Sieging Of Du Cheng (Part One)

Vaguely hearing a burst of bustling noises, Gui Wan opens her eyes, black coloured bed frame, light blue veiled curtains, a room that appears unfamiliar but is by all means neat and tidy. Her memories like a tidal wave, bits and pieces surging up into her mind, she hums a sound, sitting up, a string of bell-shaped glass is hung on the window eaves, the warm southerly breeze whisking though, sounding a clear ringing of dingling, hearing it through the window, it is exceptionally melodious.

Properly dressing herself up, she slowly paces to the window, pushing it open, the cold air comes rushing to her face, but only helps to freshen up her spirits.

There is the occasional racket outside the window, also mingled with the Nu language that she does not understand, constantly reminding her, this place is a little remote city in the northern region—Du Cheng (Governor City), and is not the prosperous Capital^[1].

This area is already far from the Capital's watch.....

"Madam—" Lou Sheng respectfully sounds a low calling from the doors, immediately followed by a few rhythmic knocks.

"Come in."

The doors open, entering a middle-aged woman, face of amiable kindness, her hands holding a basin of steaming water, greeting as she walks in: "Madam, you have just gotten up ah, with the air chilly, ground frozen, you can catch a cold with the windows open....."

Hearing her long-winded talk as always, Gui Wan faintly smiles, looking out the doors, Lou Sheng is indeed stood outside the room, face expressionless. The woman helps Gui Wan take care of her appearance with nimble hands and feet, whilst mumbling, such a beautiful person yet always dressing up like a man. Combing up a simple men's hairstyle, the woman looks at Gui Wan as she sounds a few tuts, turning around to tidy up the room, hands working nonstop, her mouth, also working nonstop all the same, muttering interesting stories about her parents in the east, and family in west, her words rushed and fast, endlessly talking to herself, also accompanied with a few giggles.

Escaping from her grasp with great difficulty, Gui Wan hurriedly heads out the room, leaving the woman alone in the room to tidy things up, still hearing the chattering coming from the room, she could not help but to sigh in relief towards Lou Sheng: "Even more formidable than Ling Long....."

Lou Sheng was first stunned, and then reveals a slight smile.

Closely following Gui Wan as she heads outside, having just walked out the big courtyard, the people outside the alley, one by one came enthusiastically greeting them, the neighbouring Aunt Li, the fruit seller Zheng San, the one who loves to boast around all day Brother Wang......watching Gui Wan respond to each and every one of them, Lou Sheng wordlessly remains silent, if not for the current pressing situation, Madam as the dignified wife of the country's Prime Minister, how would she possibly come in contact with these ordinary people of the general public?but every time he sees Gui Wan's smile like sunrise merged within, he would also feel somewhat captivated, his intuition tells him such change may not necessarily be bad, but where exactly does the problem lies, a boorish fellow like him is unable to answer this.

Over half a month ago, half way here after leaving the Capital, they were blocked up at a check stop set up by Guan Xiu Wen's deployment, fortunately, the horse carriages of the Prime Minister Estate were divided into three ways, diverting their interception, they doubled their speed across the starry night, horse running nonstop, and finally arrived at this most remote city in the northern region, the current peace, after the bumpy road of parting, feels so precious......

"Lou Sheng, stop always carrying such a grave face, look, you're scaring all the children away." Gui Wan looks around with a smile, gently reminding him.

With a little shake, he snaps out of it, Lou Sheng looks down, sure enough, there is a child, carrying a curious and inquiring look as he stares him, not daring to come close. He could only copy Gui Wan, putting on what he believes to be the most friendly smile towards that child. That child upon seeing it, instantly pales, hurriedly running away, hiding behind Aunt Li.

.....

"Lou Sheng, it's better to just keep to your grave face." As though comforting him, Gui Wan says this, glancing at the already stiffened Lou Sheng.

Having dealt with the warm hospitality of the local people, the two of them walks into the main street, heading towards Zui Xiang Ju (House of Drunken Fragrance).

Zui Xiang Ju is the biggest restaurant in Du Cheng, and Du Cheng is the Nu Tribe and Qi Ling's borderland crossover, business exchanges here is tightly knitted, the city is most distinctive in its blend of the two cultures, food, clothing, customs and so on, using a strange way to blend the two styles into one. On the road, there are both refined scholars of Qi Ling, rich in Confucian teachings, and merchants of the Nu Tribe, hearty and hospital in nature, often able to hear the communication of the two languages, happiness knowing no bounds, when they had first arrived here, the two of them were in slight disbelief, perhaps all citizens of the Capital would not be able to believe this, the two nations have fought for centuries, yet in this peculiar land they are able to gain mutual recognition and acceptance.

Walking up to where the stream ends, it is time to sit and watch the rising of

clouds^[2], perhaps it is this feeling right now, Gui Wan quietly ponders. Pacing into this loud and noisy market, contrarily makes her feel particularly calm and detached from wealth and power, she too, is but an ordinary commoner, being in this realm of commoners is so carefree, sometimes she cannot help but to think, after three months, to be able to spend the rest of her life with him amongst the commoners, what will it be like?

The geographical location of Du Cheng is extremely remote, other than military communications, other news are extremely difficult to get hold of, having left the Capital for over half a month, don't know what kind of ground shaking changes has occurred within the Capital City, hands tightly clenching into fists, she suppresses the astringent feeling shooting up her heart, throwing away those thoughts filled with worries.

He has already said he will be here in three months, so she shall firmly believe in him like this.....

"Madam," Finding that Gui Wan's smile appears to be slightly stiff, Lou Sheng speaks up to cut off her thoughts, "I heard General Lin is training soldiers in the outskirts of Du Cheng, entered the city a month earlier than us."

"Training soldiers?" The clash of battles between the Nu Army and Qi Ling all occurs at Yu Xia Guan, although Du Cheng is the crossover point with the Nu, it is not an important military land, why would Lin Rui En choose to train soldiers here? Thinking again, what has this got to do with her anyway, Gui Wan lightly smiles, Lou Sheng is also the same, always without realising it, towards that cold general, groundlessly forming three points of concern.

"We're here." Casting a glance ahead, Zui Xiang Liu is already at a close distance, empty stomach rumbling, Gui Wan takes lead in accelerating her pace of walking.

The inside of Zui Xiang Ju is a full house of guests, extremely bustling.

"Are there no more seats?" Lou Sheng's stern face looks around in confirmation again, the worker under the look of his seemingly vicious expression, cowardly nods his head, pleadingly eyeing that extremely delicately good looking gentleman behind him, but finds that he is very leisurely watching on, with not even the slightest thought of keeping the fierce person in control.

After a moment of deadlock, he sees two customers by the window pay their bills, the worker was happy to the point of shedding tears: "Great guests, there's seats, there's seats." That look of happiness, practically made the other customers inside think that what he found was not seats, but his long lost birth mother.

Gui Wan looks towards the seats by the window, two people were just about leave, bodies very tall, straight and strong, looks like the Nu people, particularly the person walking in front, who even more has such demeanour of a moving dragon, leaping tiger, the moment he turns around, Gui Wan gains a sense of familiarity. Such air of authority only those in high positions holds, she has seen more than enough in her life, not at all surprising, but why does that person's attitude and imposing manner feels so familiar to her......

"Ma-.....gentleman." Awkwardly changing the addressment, Lou Sheng calls Gui Wan to take a seat at the empty spot by the window, and the worker had already came to get their orders in great relief, but Gui Wan was still thinking back to that deeply unforgettable figure just now.

The drifting aroma of the congee makes its way over to the table, Gui Wan lets go of the doubts in her heart, with just one spoonful, a lightning fast thought flashes past her mind, and she quietly mutters: "It's him....."

"Sire....." Cautiously sounding a quiet calling, but receives a sharp glare in return, Ke Zhan hurriedly changes his words, "Gentleman."

The addressed person does not speak a word as he eats, he could only take on this unpleasant task and persist: "Gentleman, to leave home during such time, doesn't seem to be too good right? Should anything arises at home......" Voice getting quieter and quieter as he speaks, because he know that the other person is unwilling to discuss this, inwardly wailing to himself, considering that he is the head of the Nu Army's guards, only when facing this newly ascended king, would he be this useless.

After Ye Li takes the final bite, he finds that the food in front of his head guarding officer has not even been touched, and his facial expression extremely ugly, knowing that he is worried about the safety of this travel, he comfortingly says: "This time, I must personally come, with Mo Na's disguise, what else are

you afraid of?"

"But, sire, your grand seat has only just be obtained, Eldest Prince must still not be resigned, now that you are not guarding the royal hall, would......" Softly speaking of his own worries, but finds that Ye Li's expression deepens because of this, Ke Zhan immediately shuts his mouth, he has once again mentioned the taboo.

The old Nu King passed away half a year ago, before his death, he did not clearly state who is to succeed the throne, the two princes who shared considerably deep feeling suddenly turned against each other at that very moment, because Second Prince Ye Li has just been acknowledged by all in the Nu Tribe, gaining unanimous support from the elders, Eldest Prince could only withdraw, who knew his heart was still not resigned, assembling troops in order to confront Prince Ye Li, resulting in a crushing defeat, and was chased out to the north of Mo He (most northern county of China)......this matter, has been marked as the deepest taboo topic by the royal family of the Nu Capital.

Once again using an eye signal to stop the other person from revealing their identities, Ye Li summons for a worker to pay the bill, within such a bustling environment, to talk with this head guarding officer of his who has courage alone with no brain, he does not know how many consequences this could lead to, therefore he resolutely decides to leave the restaurant in order to discuss these matters.

Ke Zhan with an ashen face, follows Ye Li in getting up, walking out, within the absolutely noisy and crowded store, he too cannot speak too much of anything. Ye Li who was walking in front suddenly freezes on the spot, feet hesitant to walk, eyes carrying a dilemma of disbelief: "It's her? How could that be.....?"

Ke Zhan curiously looks towards the entrance, the workers' shuttling figures brushes past, with not a particularly notable figure in sight.

Ye Li once again looks over, there is no longer anyone over there, was it a mere misconception? That's right, how could she possibly in this place......a bitter smile revealed on his face, he suddenly feels regretful. Ignoring Ke Zhan's doubtful eyes, he walks out.

This walk is even more quieter than coming here, the head guarding officer Ke

Zhan dares not to hastily speak up, when Ye Li came out from the restaurant, his expression appears somewhat strange, he cannot help but to speculate, just what did sire see just now?

".....gentleman, this time we are taking such a risk, exactly who have we come to see?" In the end he still could not hold back his tongue.

A strong and steady voice, sweeping away the disruptions out of his mind, Ye Li simply replies: "Someone capable of defeating Lin Rui En."

Ke Zhan's jaw drops, unable to recover from being thunderstruck, Lin Rui En these three words, to the Nu Tribe, is a mountain, the peak, insurmountable, once the Lin family's military flag is raised, even if it is the warriors of the Nu Tribe, they will still be hit with a moment of hesitance and anxiety. The Nu Tribe once believed, Lin Rui En is the wall of Qi Ling, without defeating him, they cannot enter the Celestial Empire. Right now, to think there is actually a person, who is able to defeat Lin Rui En?

"Exactly what kind of person is this? Is he a famous general?" Excitedly asking, only in this very moment, did Ke Zhan sense the great value that is worth them taking the risk to come here.

Ye Li reveals a strange smile: "Famous general? He cannot even be considered a general, this person is but a scoundrel who takes to cunning means."

"Scoundrel? Able to defeat Lin Rui En?"

"Many famous generals do not die on the battlefield, but die within plotting......there is nothing particularly strange." Knowing that the simple minded Ke Zhan would not understand, Ye Li simplifies it into a sentence for him.

But Ke Zhan actually caught onto an idea right now: "Sire, your meaning is, we are immediately going to start a war against Qi Ling?"

Glancing at Ke Zhan in appreciation: "According to the sayings of the Celestial Empire people, we are merely riding the eastern wind." That is why we are taking the risk this time to obtain the last wave of eastern wind. (Note: the eastern wind can also be used to refer to the driving force of revolution)

"We're here."

Lin Rui En changes into a casual outfit before leaving the room, chilly air raiding through people's bodies as he passes by, yet it seems to not have much of an effect on him, a blue winter shirt, clean and simple, lining this young general's body with even more of a cold sternness. The military advisor walks over, eyeing him over once, before curiously saying: "Where is General heading to?"

"Going to wander around the city."

"It just so happens that the army needs to buy some supplies, how about I accompany General there?" Military Advisor gracefully smiles, no one is able to guess what is hidden behind that smile of his. Lin Rui En neither agrees nor disagrees as he remains silent, indifference amplified.

The two people rushes from the outskirts to Du Cheng by horse, leaving the horses with the city soldiers, and then enters the city like ordinary people.

Purchasing some military needs in several stores, Military Advisor carries out his task in an orderly manner, as though Lin Rui En is the one accompanying him here.

Walking out of the store, Military Advisor sneaks a glance at Lin Rui En who is somewhat unfocused: "General, a few days ago someone reported, a man with a scar on his face, a vicious looking appearance, and also a woman extremely delicately handsome, dressed in men's clothing, has arrived in the city, this matter, don't know if General has heard of it?"

In a moment of realisation, Lin Rui En gets the feeling that he has been seen through, brows knitting together, he resonantly says: "Heard it."

"Usually spending your days training the new recruits in the army, with the slightest free time, General would read books on the art of war, yet today you act uncharacteristically, wanting to enter the city to wander around, so it is also due to the reason of hearing this news." Military Advisor flatly speaks, yet every word, every phrase is sharp like a needle.

"Military Advisor, you may speak directly."

"General, what kind of time do think this is right now? Of peace and prosperity? Favourable weather conditions [for crops]? ...General, you must

know, this is Qi Ling's time of crisis," Face darkening, Military Advisor solemnly speaks, "The inner court is in turmoil, the outer court aggressively pressing. The dispute within court restless, Prime Minister Lou and his majesty with their own respective factions, I heard there is even a prominent family clan from the south involved in all this, the situation is unclear, those within the court like treading on thin ice, filled with uncertainty and unease. And the worries on the outside is even more pressing, everyone believes that with the mourning of the Nu King, no troops will be dispatched in the near future, General, only you and I know, the newly ascended Nu King Ye Li holds an ambitious heart greater than that of his father, despite only coming upon the new king's early governance right now, the army morale has been swept clean, just like waking up to a fierce tiger, its claws and fangs could be reaching out to Qi Ling any moment right now......"

"I know." Lin Rui En with a cold face, even his tone is completely cold.

"Since General knows, then it is I who spoke too much," Abruptly stopping, Military Advisor points to the small alley in front, "General can make the decision yourself."

Knowing that the little alley in front is the location of Gui Wan's current residence that the soldier had reported, Lin Rui En stands at the end of the alley, face at a loss, hesitant to make this difficult decision, why did he come here? In such a situation, even if he is to enter, what can he do? Hesitating for a long time, he gently emits a sigh, turning around, heading down the road back.

Military Advisor was quite pleased upon seeing this, how difficult this role of being a father and friend is, only he alone knows very well, he has watched Lin Rui En grow up since young, treating him just like his own child of the same blood. He only wishes that there will be no errors in his life path.....this bit of tough love, even if he can only fulfil it by playing the villain^[3], he is still willing to do so.

The two of them follows Du Cheng's most prosperous street on their way back, with endless streams of horses and carriages, shoulders and heels rubbing against others, Lin Rui En in a trance, bumps into a brawny man who was rushing by, surprised, he extends his hand, wanting to stabilise the other person. The one who was bumped into, staggers on his feet, knocked three steps back,

before he was able to stand his ground. Both sides looking at one another in surprised.

Only then did Lin Rui En clearly make out that there are two people, the one who he had bumped into, with thick brows and big eyes, orbs filled with magnanimity, signifying an upright and honest character. As for the one besides him, his eyes are deeply unpredictable, and even more has a dignified air of angered but does not speak of it. Both people has well-built figures, from appearance, they do not seem to be people of the Celestial Empire. Firstly grabbing his fist in a respectful gesture, Lin Rui En apologetically speaks: "I have offended just now."

"No, it is us who have offended." The opposition's Han language is spoken with extremely smooth fluency, just that the tone is a little strange, hurriedly glancing at Lin Rui En, the means of inquiring running strong, not waiting for Lin Rui En to return the gesture, the two people had already quickly left.

Military Advisor has his gaze locked onto the direction in which the two figures had left in, speaking in surprise: "These two people, does not seem like your ordinary people."

Lin Rui En nods in agreement, should he have bumped into an ordinary person by accident, they would definitely topple down, but just now, that person had only took three steps back, showing that he holds extraordinary skills.

At this time, no one knew, an encounter is the beginning of fate......

In heaven's recording of the fifth year, the fist lunar month.

At the Nu Tribe military camp, a time where the first rays of the morning sun rises.

"Sire," The head guarding officer enters the military tent with long quick strides, his face, revealing extreme excitement, "The situation in Du Cheng has already been inspected clearly, it is pretty much the same as sire has said."

Ye Li raises his head upon hearing this, across from the head guard, he sees a scene of snow white outside the tent, the lustrous ice bright and clean, a round sun can just be seen rising up, as though claiming all the colour in this world,

leaving only scarlet red just like that of blood.

"Ke Zhan, invite the generals in."

Sounding a resounding reply, the head guarding officer withdraws from the tent faster than when he had entered. Ye Li lifts up the sheepskin in hand, carefully tracing over the distinctive markings, unable to restrain his inner excitement, his fingers slightly trembles, the distribution of Qi Ling's frontier troops are clearly displayed before his eyes, at the touch of his fingertips, feeling as though he is penetrating into it. The Nu Tribe's centuries of dream, seems to be written on this piece of sheepskin.

Clenching the sheepskin, Ye Li slowly closes his eyes, thousands and thousands of soldiers and horses, thunderous war drums, as if it is all happening before his eyes, he and his older brother has fought for as long as half a year, ascending the throne as king, is it not for this day that he has been waiting for?

A dozen of Nu generals enters the commander tent one after another, seeing that their King is in the middle of resting his eyes meditatively, no one dares to emit a sound, Ye Li's current demeanour, is no different to a lion in deep sleep, lying between the vault of heaven, even when silent without a word, he is still able make people sense such air of unpredictable dignity. A month ago, after Ye Li had returned from Du Cheng, he had issued a notice to prepare for war, today, a dozen of the Nu Tribe's senior generals received the notice for a meeting, towards the content of this discussion, their hearts also holds some thoughts. The majority of the younger generals are in a very excited mood, whilst the older generation of generals holds a mix of happiness and worries, both sides silently takes a seat within the tent, measuring up the situation before their eyes.

"Everyone, today is a joyful day, why the pensive mood?" Opening his eyes, looking over the people on the lower seats, Ye Li asks with a smile.

Under the sweeping of his sharp eagle eyes, all the generals were startled, the oldest general speaks up: "Sire, I heard you want to attack Qi Ling, is that right?

"Yes." Ye Li clearly, forcefully admits to the mapped out plan in his heart.

"Sire, doing so will be too rash, Qi Ling is the fierce tiger on ground, and our tribe is the heroic eagle in the sky, even if the two are regularly pitting against one another, we still cannot occupy their land, should an all-out war breaks out, it will be a great great disadvantage to our tribe ah....."

Raising his hand with a wave, stopping the older general from speaking, Ye Li throws the sheepskin in hand towards the centre of the tent: "This is the distribution of Qi Ling's frontier troops, everyone take a look."

"Sire, such thing, how did you manage to obtain it?" The younger generals were first to take hold of the sheepskin, passing it around in exhibition, each and every person revealing excitement. With this in grasp, it is undoubtedly an additional ray of light to them. The Art of War states "know thyself, know your enemy", such is that exact principle.

Ye Li's eyes widens with a shine, saying: "For centuries, Qi Ling has always been living on as the Celestial Empire, occupying the most fertile land, using the best resources, and we Nu's resides in the far northern land, deeply suffering the pain of heavenly disasters. The commoners of Qi Ling drinks fine wine, their women dressed in the best silk, what our commoners eat are of course food grains, our women dressed in rough fabric, all of this, is it fair? And right now, our opportunity has come, the dispute between Qi Ling's Emperor and prime minister in the Capital City has reached a blazing point, the defensive forces near the northern borders have been centralised within the vicinity of the Capital City, taking advantage of their ongoing internal struggles, this is our great chance, capture the northern area in one swoop."

Such speech, spoken in such way that made all generals present to sense an upsurge of emotions, after a moment, one general asks: "Sire, Qi Ling's Lin Rui En is in Du Cheng, at this time, I attack Yu Xia Guan, Yu Xia Guan is completely ready on guarding duty, and is easy to defend, waiting for them to transfer troops over, then wouldn't we practically be....."

"Who said we are going to attack Yu Xia, what we are attacking is Du Cheng," Ye Li reveals a slight smile, seeing everyone clamour with comments like an exploding pot, he speaks with resolute decisiveness, "Du Cheng's defending troops only has thirty thousand people, eight thousand amongst them are even new recruits currently being trained by Lin Rui En, rather than attacking Yu Xia, we might as well seize Du Cheng, along with Lin Rui En."

With a raise of his hand, the head guarding officer by the side had already

spread out the map, everyone gathers around, all shocked by this peculiar method, all along, Du Cheng has connected Qi Ling and the Nu Tribe, but because it is located in an extremely remote area, it has always been treated as the connecting road for businesses, and not a land of military struggles. It is not that there was no one who thought of invading into Qi Ling from there, but to start from Du Cheng is undoubtedly the long way around, and now that Lin Rui En is in Du Cheng, the situation is of a different matter, each and every person knows, Qi Ling's elite army is the Lin family's army, should they manage to defeat Lin Rui En, the significance of this battle is far greater than a little city can compare to. And with the internal strife within Qi Ling hitting its peak right now, it is also giving the Nu Tribe an excellent opportunity.

Ye Li points around the map, explaining the strategy for this battle, the surrounding generals are nodding their heads convinced, the older generation of generals originally had their concerns, but listening on right now, they all reveal a smile unanimously, it is just like Ye Li had said. This is indeed a rare opportunity heaven had bestowed upon them.

"Lin Rui En is training soldiers here, an hour ride away from Du Cheng by horse, we shall first entrap him to his death, whilst besieging Du Cheng, Du Cheng is a remote area, besieging it, will be cutting off all internal communications with Qi Ling, using this as base point, we shall slowly enter from the south. A month ago, I had already secretly issued orders to prepare for war, within this month, Nu trading guilds have already gradually been banned from entering Du Cheng."

Hearing that he had arranged everything so carefully, all the generals were thoroughly convinced, everyone's fighting spirits running high, Ye Li assigns tasks to them one by one, all of them leaves the tent in delight, they have prepared everything before the battle. Only one old general remains within the tent, not to mention he is one of the Old Nu King's most trusted generals, famed for proceeding with caution, he stares at Ye Li for a long time, asking: "Sire, the preparations this time precisely targets each respective situation in Qi Ling. Such clear intelligence, don't know where sire obtained all this?"

Secretly praising the opposition's cautious heart as fine as dust, Ye Li knows that he is a highly respected old courtier, thus dares not to hide anything: "This is information offered by a prominent family clan in Qi Ling."

"Why do they want to betray their own motherland, and instead aid us?" The old general is absolutely doubtful.

"They are not aiding us," Ye Li harbours laughter as he explains, "They want to fight for the greater power of Qi Ling, but Qi Ling has Prime Minister Lou in literary, Lin Rui En in military, they must first eliminate these two people in order to achieve this, to offer us intelligence right now, is but only to lend our hands in order to get rid of Lin Rui En, and then they will later send for troops to force us back into retreat, this way, from the Emperor of Qi Ling's perspective, he can only rely heavily on them."

Once the old general hears this, he is filled with absolute lament: "The minds of the Celestial Empire people truly are terrifyingly deep and heavy......but, sire clearly knows of their schemes, do you still want to serve as their tool for lending a sword in order to kill?"

"As long as we are alert, the matter will not be in their control, besides, without their help right now, we too will not be able to easily enter their territory, as long as we besiege Du Cheng, without the use of communication that we had cut off, that family clan will not be able to leak out any news, whilst they are using us, we too can also use them, don't you think so? General Ba Dan....."

Up to this very moment, does he finally feel sincere admiration towards this younger generation, old Ba Dan stands up, kneeling on the ground, his right hand placed on his chest: "My greatest Nu King, with the bestowment of heaven's grace, our great Nu shall certainly no longer head into the adversity."

Walking up to help him up, Ye Li lifts the tent curtains, the two quickly exits, the glowing red sun already hanging high up, the snow covered ground reflecting its brilliance, the northern wind blows, powdery snow drifting, Ye Li looks out towards the military troops outside the tent, currently moving forward in deployment, his heart vastly open at ease, pointing to the front, he says the old general besides him: "The snow accumulating to such thickness, is just right for masking the sound of horse hooves, on our journey to the south, three days later, be sure to defeat Lin Rui En."

His voice perfectly resonant, a wave of silence washes over the military camp,

the soldiers have already heard of their course of action from their own respective general, hearing Ye Li's rhetoric words, no one does not raise his long spear, loudly shouting: "Nu Tribe sure win, sure win."

An entire mountain wildly ringing with their cries, each wave louder than the other, directly surging into the skies.

Once the sun rises to the set time, the Nu troops makes their move, with the cavalry unit in lead, dressed in armour, carrying a long spear, slowly crossing the plains, each rank consistently arranged in neat rows, like a flowing tide of black heads within this scene of pure white, advancing towards Du Cheng.

This advance opens up the "Battle of the Jade Governor", and those residing within Du Cheng still remains unaware, in celebration of the first lunar month, firecrackers are set off, mutual exchange of blessings are made, within the intoxication of beautifully sweet dreams, pleasant smiles overflows......

Within the dim moonlight, the last bit of brightness is consumed into years of darkness, gradually approaching, gradually nearing, like clouds like mist, spreading over the skies, covering the ground, fierce roaring tucked in between, brushing against the face as it comes......

Violently forcing her eyes open, Gui Wan pants with a slight haste, the dream just now, is so fear inducing, leaving only the resulting palpitating heart behind, the book beside her hand falls to the ground, emitting a sound, she lowers her body, upon picking up the book, her arm feels limp. Didn't think that she could also sink into dreamland whilst reading. Standing up, she exercises her limbs, opening the door, outside the house is the "peng—" sound of the firecrackers, suddenly giving her another scare.

The merry voices celebrating the New Year travels over, she listens to them, her lips hooking up into a shallow smile. This is the first time she had left the Capital during a festive season, she remembers how back in the Prime Minister Estate, during this festive season, Lou Che is the busiest, receiving daily blessings from the officials, once evening arrives, he would be bringing a lot of treasures to present before her, like exhibiting his riches as he lets her pick, drinking the pleasantly fragrant plum blossom wine, the two will converse, chatting about

anything under the sky, with no topic being an exception, once tired, she will directly lie down on the long chair, when she wakes up, his first phrase will definitely be "look at you, how is this the appearance of the Prime Minister Madam?"

Past memories just like yesterday, today, the things are still there, but the people are no longer the same.....

Hundreds and thousands of li apart, is my husband safe and sound? The Prime Minister Estate's plum blossoms in full bloom, is the fragrance still the same?

Here, every day I rise with the sun, rest with the moon, watching the unrestrained clouds, just that I don't know if you who is residing within the Capital City, is looking up at the same sky as I.....

.....

"[Older] Brother....."

A little tug on the edge of her clothes, Gui Wan gathers away her reveries, looking down, it is Aunt Li's child from next door, adorable and energetic^[4], clever and well behaved, with a pair of big sparkling eyes, identifying people from their clothing, and would only call Gui Wan "brother."

"Brother, go out to play......" Pulling Gui Wan along as he heads outside, his face lit with a beaming smile, the two are pulled along onto the main street, everywhere filled with pleasantly happy faces, seven out of ten places carrying the colour of red. Gui Wan looks all around the bustling street scene, feeling rather curious, from her peripheral vision, she sees Lou Sheng following behind, knowing that he is keeping them protected with great attentiveness, she is able to look around at ease.

"Madam, there's too many people. How about we stray away from here a bit?" Seeing that child let go of Gui Wan's sleeve, running to the side to play with other children, Lou Sheng comes forward in reminder.

"En," Gui Wan smiles as she nods her head, watching the crowded street, she turns around, just about to return, when she suddenly says, "Strange, do you find that, the amount of Nu people on the streets has lessened a lot?"

Lou Sheng looks around the streets after hearing this: "Indeed, compared to

when we just arrived, there is a lot less." This phrase is spoken with a very subtle implication, when they had arrived, Nu tradesmen could be spotted anywhere, but right now, they practically can't even spot the shadow of any Nu tradesmen.

"Madam is worried that the one we saw the other day is really Nu King Ye Li?" After returning on that day, Gui Wan tells him of everything she had seen, he too completely baffled, logically speaking, with Ye Li's current status, he simply should not be appearing here, back then, he was thinking perhaps Madam saw wrong, but right now, the concerns hidden in their hearts feels more realistic.

Du Cheng is only a business passage, it cannot possibly become a land of military struggles, moreover the Nu King had only ascended the throne not so long ago, would he be putting the military force to use right now?

Lou Sheng calculates the possible chances, the deeper delves into it, the more he is unable to digest it, looking towards Gui Wan, finding that she too is frowning, seeming to hesitate over making some difficult decisions.

"Madam....." Lou Sheng softly calls.

"I know, let me think it over again." Cutting off his words, Gui Wan smiles, she knows Lou Sheng's meaning, wanting to report this matter to Lin Rui En, towards Lin Rui En, precisely because of Lin Ran Yi, he has gained the feeling of *love for the house extends to the crows perched on its roof^{[5]}*, that is why he is taking this matter exceptionally seriously, but as of now, she is only making empty speculations with no basis, moreover she a lowly woman, with what entitlement does she has to warn the great general?

- [1] Capital as in jīng jī / 京畿 the capital city and its surrounding territory
- [2] These two lines comes from the poem <u>Villa on Mount Zhong Nan by Wáng</u> Wéi/ 王維
- [3] When the military advisor refers to himself as the **villain**, the actual words he used is **bái liǎn /** 白脸 which correctly translates to **white face**. The villainous connotation of these words comes from Peking or Beijing Opera, where the role of the villain is traditionally completed with a painted white face.
 - [4] Adorable and energetic is what the original phrase hù tóu hù nǎo / 虎头虎

脑 refers to, with the literal translation being – tiger head, tiger brain – often used to describe a healthy young boy who is simple and honest by nature.

[5] Love for the house extends to the crows perched on its roof—I think the meaning of this idiom is pretty straightforward, although the translation for it ended up being so long -_- ài wū jí wū /爱屋及乌—means to extend your love for other things in relation to the thing/person you love.

Anyways~ there's the answer to your question moonalice13 haha, Ye Li is back, and ready to bring more trouble. Of course we have General Lin here too, even if he may not have appeared much here, but there will be more of him soon...

Part 2



CHAPTER THIRTY

Sieging Of Du Cheng (Part Two)

Three days later, outskirts of Du Cheng, military camp.

"Gentleman, our Military Advisor is occupied with matters right now, if you please wait here for a while." Inside an ordinary military camp, the soldier reports as though reciting a book, those eyes stealing a few glimpses at Gui Wan, finding that "his" face shows no expression, he awkwardly withdraws.

Taking a sip of the tea, finding that the water had already cooled down, two or three yellow tea leaves floating above, Gui Wan's heart was filled with hidden annoyance, how could she possibly not see, this Military Advisor holds the proper intention to embarrass her.

Under such anger, she was just about to throw back her sleeves in leave, when a white lustrous jade suddenly falls out from her sleeve, she picks it up, after a long moment, patiently sits back down again. In this world, such superfluous attitude of adding flowers to embroidery can be seen everywhere, yet the timely gifting of charcoal during the snowy season is but a rare sight, Lin Rui En has come to her aid several times, so why should she because of such small matters, delay the serious business.

Seeing her sit down again, Lou Sheng secretly lets out a sigh of relief.

Another long while passes, when the tent curtains are once again lifted, the gentle and refined Military Advisor slowly walks in, seeing Gui Wan and Lou Sheng, he first reveals a look of surprise, and then walks forward with a harmonious smile: "And here I was wondering who it is, a rare visitor, a rare visitor, so it is Madam Lou.....gracing us with your presence!"

Clearly aware that within such smile, hypocritical and insincere feelings makes up the majority of it, Gui Wan also spreads a smile like orchids: "You're too courteous, Military Advisor is the true noble grace here, really not easy to catch a little glimpse."

Heartily sound a laugh, Military Advisor speaks very politely, only acting as though he is unable to understand the satire in Gui Wan's words: "Don't know what Madam has come to enlighten me with today?" This woman indeed isn't a simple one, the average official madam, how would they possibly be able to withstand such trifle provocation, her identity is of extreme nobility, yet is still able to withstand a moment of anger, this too is a rare find in women.

No longer beating around the bush, Gui Wan tells him everything that she has seen and thought of with this month, her thoughts are very clear, with quick wits and eloquent tongue, Military Advisor is also a wise man, and is immediately able to understand the deeper meaning.

After listening to her, Military Advisor is deeply frowning, somewhat not daring to believe it, after a long while does he finally throw out a word: "Really?"

Of course Gui Wan would not answer such stupid question of his, who would want to make a joke out of such serious military affairs. Military Advisor stands up, his face carrying a chill, pacing two rounds of circles, occasionally sizing up Gui Wan and Lou Sheng, only seeing their calm and composed attitudes, and is only able to lament: "Madam Lou, looks like, I must ask of you to temporarily stay in camp overnight."

Seeing that the matter this time is of utmost severity, Military Advisor is afraid to take on responsibility, having her stay in camp, should this matter prove to be false, he may very well push Gui Wan forward, saying it is Madam Lou's false report. What a great cunning old fox, appearing to have seen through it, Gui

Wan with great pleasure, nods in promise.

A person finds a pair of waterproof shoes by the river, they present their good intentions, only to get fishy water thrown all over them, looks like, being a good person really does no good. Grace laced around her laughter, Gui Wan spends the night in the military camp. Military Advisor referred to her as a noble from the Capital, thus the soldiers dares not to offend, an entire night can be said to be peaceful.

The next day, a little soldier hurriedly rushes over, telling her, Military Advisor summons her.

An ominous feeling shooting up her heart, Gui Wan brings Lou Sheng along as they head into the commander tent, Military Advisor is currently sat in centre, upon seeing the arriving people, he raises his head, Gui Wan is struck with slight shock, lines of red filling his eyes, his hair a little messy, appearing to have not slept all night, even the blue veins on his forehead can be vaguely traced out, unable to hide an expression of grieving, upon opening his mouth, even his voice has gone hoarse: "Madam......Du Cheng is in danger......"

Hands clenched into fists, Gui Wan widens her eyes upon hearing this, holding back that stunned expression, stabilising her bearings, she asks: "What does Military Advisor mean?"

Three months.....only one more month is left, heart filled with absolute fear, Gui Wan locks onto Military Advisor's expression without letting go, suppressing the fear that is slowly floating up over time, could it be, the one unable to uphold the three months promise, is not Lou Che, but her?

"Yesterday, with ten people to a team, I sent out five teams to inform General Lin, alternatively sending out two teams to head south in order to report to the imperial court, but up to now, there is still not the slightest of news......looks like the situation is extremely unfavourable." Military Advisor quietly thinks for a moment, after his mood calms down a lot, he truthfully speaks.

Restraining the unease in her heart, Gui Wan sits down on the first seat in the tent, turning her head to look at Military Advisor: "How far from here is General Lin, how many soldiers is he leading?"

"General Lin is approximately thirty li away from Du Cheng, less than half a day

horse ride away, has left to train soldiers this time, leading eight thousand young soldiers." Barely able to open his mouth, Military Advisor concisely replies. There is nothing worse than the current situation, the head commander is not in camp, messages aren't getting through, unclear whether there is or isn't an enemy. Based on his many years of experience, this very moment is already the forewarning of the approaching danger.

"All eight thousand are new soldiers?" Gui Wan raises her voice in surprise, painted brows slightly knitted.

Military Advisor bitterly smiles, didn't think that this pampered woman is this sharp-witted, with one grasp of his one phrase, she is able to analyse the formidability, he nods his head in helplessness: "That's right, all eight thousand are new soldiers. Just over twenty thousand military force is left behind within Du Cheng right now, the local army accounting for the majority, only the lesser five thousand, are of the Lin family troops."

The air cold, ground frozen, a charcoal brazier stands in centre of the tent, cosy heating filling the air, occasionally stars would seemingly be tucked between the charcoal, yet those within the tent does not sense this in the slightest, everyone's faces weighing heavy, hands and feet ice cold.

"Madam, with the current situation like this, in your opinion, what should be done?" For the first time, Military Advisor assumes lower status, speaking with the tone of inquiring.

Raising her brows as she glances at Military Advisor, Gui Wan reveals a barely visible smile: "What is Military Advisor saying, such huge matters of military affairs, a mere woman like me, what plan can I possibly have......" What a great old fox, speaking of so many military defence reports just now, so he wants to drag her down as well. From the looks of it, he has clearly figured out a plan, wanting for her help, yet insists on putting on a look of consultation.

Staring at Gui Wan as he carefully eyes her, seeming to have found some sort of peculiar matter, Military Advisor lets out a long sigh: "Madam truly is a clever one, one who stands in the light does not speak shady words, Madam, with the current situation, I really cannot remain vague anymore. We must immediately get in contact with General Lin, I am unable to leave this spot, we are still lacking

news of the five teams sent out to form lines of communications, therefore....."

"Therefore Military Advisor should have found a competent and capable commander to come in contact with General Lin now." A direct flow of words cutting off Military Advisor's speech, Gui Wan's eyes like stars slightly squints.

The words of request stuck in his throat due to Gui Wan's disruption, Military Advisor knits his brows, not knowing how to speak up. Unable to speak of his difficulties, with not even three months of coming to this place, the local army morale is irregular, and are not as good to command as the brothers of the Lin family troops, the current situation is unclear, he does not dare to rashly leak out any news, should panic arises, the consequences will be disastrous. Thinking over and over again, he actually thought of Gui Wan, clearly aware of how ridiculous this idea is, she is but only a weak woman, and her identity is particularly special......but in such critical moment, in such situation where no one is available, no one is trustable, he actually feels that this woman, compared to the local commander who lacks endurance, is much more reliable.

Speaking of it from another point of view, she knows the Nu King, even if the delivering message is snatched away by the Nu Tribe, with her identity, the Nu Tribe will not do such stupid thing of killing her.....after repeated consideration, in this situation, she alone is the best candidate.

The inside of the tent heavily quiet like water, Military Advisor mind spinning with this idea, yet finds it difficult to speak up.

Thinking to herself, that this place she cannot stay any longer, Gui Wan appears to be ready to leave, with the tightening of her sleeve, she turns around, meeting Lou Sheng's strongly astringent and complex look in surprise.

Under nervousness he had actually rashly grabbed onto Gui Wan's sleeve, Lou Sheng immediately takes two steps back, silent without word, with a sound of "putong" as he drops to his knees, lowering his head, his mouth softly calling out: "Madam....."

Military Advisor who is in centre of the tent, upon seeing Lou Sheng's actions, found it absolutely bizarre, he sees that Gui Wan because of this appeared expressionless, he decides to simply see what will happen, his intuitions tells him, Lou Sheng kneeling like this has something to with General Lin.

"Madam....." Seeing that Gui Wan is unaffected by this, Lou Sheng grows desperate, heavily knocking his head onto the ground, "May Madam look at it in favour of Ran Yi......"

Gui Wan upon hearing Lou Sheng's begging, the lustrous jade in her sleeve seems to have been called out, taking out the jade pendant, she absently looks at it, Lin Ran Yi, Lin Rui En......these two names have accompanied several dangers in rescuing her, from the Nu Tribe to Yu Xia Guan it was Ran Yi's laughter that accompanied her, at Feng Xi Slope it was Lin Rui En who protected her with his life at stake, when the Prime Minister Estate was besieged, it was him who bent down to pick up her handkerchief......

Each and every bit adding to her debt of gratitude, Gui Wan ah Gui Wan, how could you be so selfish?

Hundreds of feelings gathering, within a moment, she crazily looks at the jade pendant and enters a frozen state, watching Lou Sheng bend down to beg of her, her heart fires up, turning back to the Military Advisor, melodically saying: "Military Advisor, please lend me a hundred soldiers."

Military Advisory is completely overjoyed, not exploring into the reasons for her change of mind, he immediately agrees, hurried steps leaving the tent to arrange the troops.

Lou Sheng raises his head, not knowing whether it is gratitude or something else expressed on his face, he murmurs: "Thank you Madam....."

With only half a stick of incense time, a hundred soldiers had already lined up outside the tent, the soldier's discipline is prim and proper, carrying arrow quivers on their backs, watching Military Advisor lead an extremely delicately handsome young gentleman head towards them in such ethereal fluttering manner, they all look at each other, finding it incomprehensible. Once they hear that they are to follow this gentleman's lead upon leaving this camp, they were even more astonished. They are all brothers of the Lin family's troops, and so only accepts their instructions obediently, with not an uttering of a word, completely ready to go.

Gui Wan rides alone within the team, Lou Sheng closely following by her side, once he sees Gui Wan launch her body onto the horse by herself, he too was

stunned by the sight, even he did not know, Madam's horse-riding skills is quite decent.

Leaving Du Cheng, the blue skies like a clean wash, with the occasional cloud, amongst the boundless wilderness, the leisurely horse stands within this white coloured plains, everyone is in high spirits.

The sky and land so pure as though it has not been stained with a single speck of dust, such scene draws in Gui Wan, the unease felt when leaving the city is also gradually put down, seeing that all the soldiers are also sharing contented expressions, she guesses that Military Advisor did not tell them of the real intention in leaving the city, Gui Wan could only smile bitterly. In the moment they were leaving the city, she had only just come to realise, Military Advisor's deeper meaning in wanting a woman like her to pass on the message, even if she is caught by the Nu Tribe, with her special status, there will still be negotiations available......

What a great old fox, inwardly cursing at him, Gui Wan puts on an appearance of nothing going on. Since matters have already come to this, she can only continue on.

The team of hundred people are all leisurely riding their horses, with no dangers met along the road, very quickly do they pass through the plains, nearby is a mountain scenery, the mountain steepness low and flat, stretching out like the pulse in veins. Listening to the recommendations of a soldier, they weave their way down a small mountain path, why they chose this faraway path and avoid the main little road, Gui Wan knows very well, the current mission is to contact Lin Rui En, first and foremost, of course they have to keep their own lives safe.

Over two hours of horse riding later, everyone remains silent without a sound, no one knows what the leading pretty gentleman is thinking about. Fortunately today's wind and snow is not too big, still appropriate to make up for a nice scenery along the journey.

As they were heading down the path, originally very quiet, and then from the north, gradually getting louder and louder.....seems like roars, also seems like an avalanche, surging into the ears like a powerful tidal wave. The soldiers starts

muttering amongst themselves. The arrangement of the entire team becomes slightly messy.

Gui Wan upon hearing this sound, also finds it absolutely strange, she has no experience in such things, and can only inquire the soldiers beside her.

One soldiers after a moment of hesitation, speaks up: "Gentleman, perhaps a battle has arose in front."

Slightly stunned, Gui Wan pulls at the reins, the entire team immediately stops on the spot. Seeing everyone hold expressions of puzzlement, her heart is met with a moment of struggles, cleanly bringing out the real purpose and the situation before their eyes, telling all of this to the soldiers. Having heard her speech, all the soldiers reveals a look of thunderstruck, sinking into silence for long while, one soldier situated at the front steps forward, resonantly saying: "Gentleman, we are all soldiers of the Lin family troops, for General Lin, we are not afraid to sacrifice, please continue forward."

With not the slightest hesitation to sing her praises, as expected of the Lin family troops, Gui Wan thus continues to lead the team forward. Sat high on the horse, the hands holding onto the reins making a subtle move, although her face show steadiness, only she herself is aware, she is unable to suppress the fear in her heart, her back already oozing with a layer of cold sweat.

Passing this hill, exactly what will be awaiting her ahead.....

Piercing their way through the little path, murderous cries shaking the skies, one look of boundless people like a huge tidal wave, completely covering the mountain in front. Gui Wan's eyes widen, jaws dropped, as she stares ahead, her face washed white. Having marched forth through half a day of journey, facing such a scene, her heart is practically overwhelmed with great burden. Wave after wave of battle cries shaking her rational senses, immediately ordering for the team to stop, and hide their presence within the lush forest between the hills, afraid that the enemy troops ahead will learn of their existence.

Fortunately she is only leading a hundred people, very quickly do they hide their horses, Gui Wan, Lou Sheng and a few leading soldiers, stand at the mountain slope overlooking ahead.

A terrifying scene meeting their eyes.....

The trees of the low mountain ahead exhausting its ability to cut off the light, the bare mountain and plains densely populated with people, a mass of black heads, erasing the snow scene, endless numbers of troops of soldiers and horses, arranged together in such congested manner, so tightly packed with not the thinnest of opening in sight, the gathered troops, surrounds one mountain in endless streams, the mountain slope is clearly different to that of other mountains, only this mountain has only the shadows of trees left.

Watching the countless soldiers and horses, blocking the paths ahead in such towering manner, murderous air heavily pressing down, vaguely exerting pressure across the entire mountain, Gui Wan's heart runs cold, separated by one hill, she still feels immensely threatened.

"It's the Nu Army....." A soldier stood closes speaks in a trembling tone, his voice may not be resonant, but practically everyone hears it, "General...... General Lin is surrounded on that mountain."

Having already guessed that the only mountain with not a single tree in sight is where General Lin lies, Gui Wan still could not hold back a shudder, the cold wind brushing over her face, seeps into her heart, freezing her into completely numbing her senses. General Lin is surrounded amongst the Nu Army, what is she to do? The more terrifying thought is, after surrounding General Lin here, what would the Nu Army do? Siege Du Cheng? No.....no, Du Cheng has already been sieged, just that the encirclement is still very big in size, so the people of Du Cheng has still not detected it.

Seeing the Nu Army's unprecedented mighty force of military discipline, Gui Wan's heart races with loud sounds of peng peng, only finding the army before her eyes has faces of savages, people like tides, inducing the horror in her.

"Approximately how many people are there in front?" The foundations of singing opera since young is great help to her, despite her heart struck with absolute fear, her attitude is still like that of a clean and comfortable breeze.

Seeing this leading gentleman calm and composed, the soldiers also gradually casts away their sense of panic, the more experienced soldiers amongst them, stares ahead at the Nu army like looming black clouds, making one little estimation, each one with their faces turning ashen: "Approximately sixty

thousand surrounding soldiers, stationed ahead there is approximately.....no possible way to estimate.....only afraid there are about a hundred thousand....."

Chills shooting up her heart, Gui Wan watches over the scene before her eyes with bated breath. There are hundreds of thousands soldiers blocking the path in front, General Lin only has eight thousand new recruits, not a real chance of winning, should she retreat back to Du Cheng, what is the use, a Du Cheng without Lin Rui En, cannot possibly bear this blow.....what's the best thing to do?

Extending her hand to summon upon a few soldiers, Gui Wan orders for them to follow the same route back, reporting the facts to Military Advisor, and to send for troops in rescue of General Lin, as long as General Lin is saved, she believes there is still a thin chance of survival......

Ten horses rapidly shoots down the path, watching the messengers head back, Lou Sheng worriedly looks towards Gui Wan, hesitant to speak. Gui Wan upon seeing this, dismissively respond with a sentence of, without the skin, what is the hair to be attached to? The soldiers hearing this, were all awe-inspired, raising their spirits, they station themselves by the mountain slope, observing the situation.

The huge Nu Army occasionally sounds a wave of loud roars, such noise like an earthquake, directly surging up to the clouds, densely surrounding the mountain, yet makes not a single move.

"They want to destroy General Lin's confidence." Lou Sheng stood on one side, speaks with heavy seriousness.

Gui Wan looks back at the entire group, faced with such army morale of complete oppressiveness, many soldiers were very anxious, with such pressure just from looking on at the side-lines, General Lin in direct face of this, who knows how he is feeling? Waiting up to two entire hours of time, the Nu Tribe once again emits a thunderous roar, just when Gui Wan thought they were emptily building momentum again, the Nu Army begins to take action.

First it was a few rows of archers stepping forth, pulling at the strings, releasing the arrows, a mass wave of thousands of arrows, shooting into the air like a downpour of rain, the black shadows practically covering the entire blue

sky, pouring down upon the mountain slope, the arrows piercing the air emits a sound that overshadows the northern winds, like thousands and thousands of people roaring, swarming to its destination.

Gui Wan's heart tightens as she watches this scene unfold, although she does not believe in ghosts nor gods, but right now, she too cannot help but to pray to the heavens, to protect General Lin at all costs.

After the passing of the rain of arrows, there is not a single movement from the mountain slope, the Nu army once again changes their batch of archers unit, one wave after one wave, the arrows like endlessly running ribbons, shooting towards the mountain slope, an entire mountain filled with arrow figures, the land bruised all over, it is just as Ye Li's command stated, even it is but one little fly, it is still not to leave the mountain alive.

Under waves after waves of attacks, the mountain slope still shows not the slightest of movements, General Lin's troops, under these bursts of battle cries and murderous attacks, appears abnormally quiet, deaths and injuries unknown. Gui Wan was secretly growing desperate, along with the passing of time, her heart has continuously been sinking downwards. Four hours of attacking, the Nu Tribe seems to also lost their patience in their one-sided dull attacks. Many soldiers were loudly shouting to advance forward, waving the broadswords and spears in hand.

Soldiers of the Nu Tribe are renowned for their bravery, strong men, strong horses, are particularly good at battling on horses, within this little area of hills and mountains, they are unable to use this to their potential, horses are naturally not suited for going uphill, thus using archery attacks. But right now, not a single shadow has made an appearance from Lin Rui En's army, taking action with silence, the Nu people's pride is unable to withstand this, the soldiers eager to charge up the mountain.

Ye Li immediately commands to not make a move for now, maintaining an average distance as they continue to launch arrow attacks.

Seeing that within the Nu Army, there is an on-foot team with a dress code different from the general Nu Army, and messenger soldiers running back and forth, seeming to all gather in that area, Gui Wan makes some calculations, that

tent is precisely Ye Li's king tent. The Nu army's attacks on and off, under the circumstances of absolutely no counterattack from Lin Rui En, the unease in the Nu Army slowly spreads. But the great difference between the strengths of both armies is extremely obvious, so the Nu Army is still able to refrain from panic, only obeying orders as they continue to attack in waves.

Night gradually falls, daylight heavily sinking, the northern wind strengthens, white snow drifting across the sky, the Nu Army stops their attacks, setting up camp, lighting up torches, the fires forming spots of sparks, looking from high up, like the starry sky descended to earth, the milkyway like chains, forming a circle, heavily surrounding the mountain.

Seeing the fire torches of the Nu army below her feet, forming a map of stars, Gui Wan remains speechlessly silent, afraid of the Nu Army discovering their presence, they did not even dare to light up any torches, to face the grand occasion of starry fires lighting the wilderness, no one could utter a sound, the soldiers gnaw at the dry food, Gui Wan worriedly hangs her heart up high, not even able to place the food near her mouth, as she silently stares over the mountains, thoughts spinning.

The sound of horse hooves gradually drawing in, all the soldiers raise to their feet, Gui Wan also looks back, the dozen of the horses stops behind her, so the messengers have returned. Everyone surrounds them, disorderly asking. The leading soldier of the messenger group, knits his brows as he lowers his head, not a sound of answer.

"How did it go?" Opening up a path between everyone, Gui Wan walks up to him, voice revealing nervousness.

Upon hearing her voice, the dozen of soldiers drops to their knees, the leader looks to Gui Wan, tiger-like eyes vaguely containing tears, with a low hoarse voice, he answers: "Military Advisor is unwilling to send troops over."

"What?" Unable to hold back in exclaiming, Gui Wan's heart fires up, taking two steps forward, her eyes like the frosty moon, locked on the soldier, "Why?"

Those wave after wave of attacks leaving an immensely strong impression in her heart, if not for the support of holding faith in reinforcements, she would not have possibly held on to this moment, personally hearing such news,

thunderstruck, the anger inside surges up. This Military Advisor, exactly what does he want to do.....

Stunned by the imposing manner of her frost cold attitude, the soldier grievingly says: "Military Advisor said, they are unable to contact the imperial court, Du Cheng has already been sieged, there are only over twenty thousand military power, too late to save, also incapable of saving....."

"But without General Lin, how is twenty thousand soldiers able to defend Du Cheng?" Gui Wan raises her voice, unable to suppress her rage.

The leading soldier kneeling at the front has to bear the brunt of tasting Gui Wan's anger, recalling the scene of being rejected by the Military Advisor back in the city, and also thinking of Lin Rui En leading eight thousand soldiers, trapped within the surrounding Nu Army alone, tears comes splashing against the ground: "Gentleman, Military Advisor has said, deploying troops now, Du Cheng will then immediately fall into the hands of the Nu Army......the Nu Army still isn't aware of Du Cheng's actual situation right now, not sending out troops in aid, still holds a trace of hope, sending troops, leads to certain death......"

Lips forming a thin line, Gui Wan mournfully looks back, looking at the sea of starry firelight in the wilderness, her eyes faintly lightens, be it anger, be it sorrows, all are swallowed up in the dark night, leaving not a single trace behind.

"Military Advisor also said....." The soldier seeing Gui Wan turn around, hurriedly chokes back his tears as he speaks.

"Also said what?" Whatever said is already too late to be spoken.....

"Military Advisor said, he is the person who wants to save General the most, but......but Du Cheng still has hundreds of thousands of citizens, who is to care for their life and death? Sending troops out to save General Lin today, will be at the expense of abandoning the overall situation, should General Lin die in battle right now, that is still a glorious defeat, if troops are sent, even if General Lin is rescued, he too will be living life like death......such is more painful than death itself....."

The messenger soldier sorrowfully wails, the remaining soldiers were also hiding their faces, these soldiers who have been through battlefields are all able to understand the meaning behind those words. Soldiers, fights for their home,

fights for their country, fights for their people, but are unable to fight for themselves.....

Lou Sheng walks forward, slowly coming up to Gui Wan's side, suddenly discovering she is grievingly looking in front, tears like crystals dripping down in blank unawareness.

It was at this very moment, a huge racket sounds from the mountain plains, on that distant mountain slope, the originally neat arrangement of flickering firelights, is abruptly messed up, gradually spreading out from that mountain slope spot, the entire map of fired up milky way shattering to pieces, issuing a deafening angry roar.

"Moving, their moving—" Lou Sheng softly cries out, everyone was absolutely shocked, hastily going forward. Gui Wan wipes away the light tears on her cheeks, attentive eyes looking over the mountain plains.

The moon hides behind the layer of clouds, the northern wind still growling, the night sky like black ink, the flickering firelight becoming the only guide of direction, the rows of firelight on the mountain slope spreads out, as though chopped out by a knife, initially a little messy, but behind it actually gradually expands. Suddenly smoke sluggishly rises, firelight growing unnecessarily bigger, the mountain slope where General Lin is stationed suddenly reflecting red in the sky, breath-snatching roars and wild chanting, gradually rises, gradually nears, the Nu Army's encirclement also beginning to shrink.

"It's General Lin.....it's General Lin trying to breakout......" It is unclear who this sound of cry came from, but due to this cry, everyone rises with force and spirit, hearts hung high, eyes intently overlooking the battle.

With numerous attacks from the Nu army, he did not take any action, enduring after enduring, right now, he lends the disarray during night to breakout: fire burning the forest, pushing himself to the rear path, all in order to resurrect after presumed dead, encouraging the soldiers' courage to survive......even if she does not understand the arts of war, Gui Wan is still able to bit by bit analyse the reason and purpose behind such course of action, heart holding deep admiration, indeed a illustrious military success, General Lin......

But the difference in strength is far too large, the result of this battle of life

and death is practically set in stone, could it be that she is just going to watch on like this, awaiting for fate to fall upon them?

The firelight before them, shines brightly in her eyes, the glimmer in her eyes makes a light turn, she has never felt more clearly than she does in this very moment, how wonderful of a thing, the existence of life and death is.....

Although a small force cannot triumph the heavens, she still wants to strive forth and pitch out her best efforts.....

"Someone come—"

Full

You may want to have some tissues ready...



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Suddenly Surrounded Under The Starry Night

Drums of war like thunder, sounding horns urging on.

Wild roars deafens the ears as the sound wave hits, Lin Rui En's stretched straight body, towering like a mountain as he stands before the mountain slope, after seeing the enemy situation, sword-like brows deeply locks together, lips thin like blade. A burst of rustling trees sounds behind him, he turns around, to see the soldiers use heavily thick wood to solidly repair the horse stables as ordered, their actions lacking in their usual neatness, such low morale practically close to panic.

Lin Rui En takes big strides forward, removing his armour, rolling up his sleeves, as he helps himself to the wooden planks on the ground.

"General, such matters are better left for the rest of the brothers to do it." The lieutenant who has followed Lin Rui En for many years, hurries forward to advise him in slight alarm.

Lin Ru En's one hand secures the wooden plank to the water feeder area of the stable, his remaining hand occupied with a hammer, strongly beating the nails into place, answering without even turning his head: "Time is running out,

everyone come repair the stables."

The lieutenant is dumbstruck for a moment, before immediately sprinting off to relay orders. The soldiers have only been trained for just over two months, facing such parade of a mighty force surrounding them, they are all absolutely terrified inside, but seeing General Lin so concentrated in repairing the stable, although they don't understand the reason for this, their hearts still eases down a little, learning from others to ignore the roars completely surrounding them on this mountain, they busy themselves with the task at hand.

"Have everyone gathered here, act swiftly." Seeing the soldiers complete their work, the stables already fortified with two additional layers, Lin Rui En puts on his armour, whilst loudly giving out orders, another round of thunderous howls sounds from below the slope, one wave louder than the other.

Eight thousand soldiers very quickly forms a square unit in rows, thick shields held in their hands, looking nervous. Lin Rui En's eyes slowly drifts across their faces, amongst them, there are even those in their teenage years, soldiers that can even be considered children, armours new and bright, as they stand in centre of the team, the rising of snow amongst the northern wind like ice blades slashing past their faces, causing their noses to be frozen red.

Above the mountain slope, the atmosphere is so solemn it leaves people terrified, only the cries rumbling like thunder are ringing in their eyes.

The armoury sound of tidal waves slowly eases up, Lin Rui En walks up towards the edge of the slope, looking at the mobilisation of the Nu Army below, a chilly air diffusing, he turns around, walking back into the square unit, holding up the iron shield, a raise of his hand, such blade-like posture bringing upon a breeze: "Raise the shields."

The thick shields sways the light of snow into hiding the black gloss, neat lines forming a protective layer above the heads of eight thousand soldiers, and upon Lin Rui En's gestured command, everyone stoops into squatting positions, looking like the face of a black wall of shields standing in the middle of the mountain slope.

With no light of sun nor moon, heaven and earth in dejection, shooting arrows falling more densely than that of rain showers, hitting the top of the shields,

issuing the struggling sounds of heavy metal clashing, sharp, abrupt, like that of the devil dancing on top.

The soldiers hidden under the shield sounds grieving moans, but no one can hear it, under such attack like raging storm, everyone could only pray for survival. Arrows pierces through the gaps, and soldiers falling under the arrows, their blood splattering all over, yet those surrounding them can only adjust their positions immediately, completely filling up the gaps, the sound of raining arrows swallowing everything else up.

Time grows even more absently blank than that of the snow itself, the arrows coming wave after wave, hidden away from the light all day, the soldiers grits their teeth, persistent in holding up the iron shield in hand, occasionally making a switch of hand, what's more difficult than bearing with the numb pain in their body, is the splattered blood of their fallen comrades, with not even the time to wipe away the bloodstains nor mourn their deaths, they can only wait for the next round of attack, slowly haunted by the shadows of death.

Up to this very moment, did the troops come to understand the intention behind Lin Rui En's previous orders to solidify the stables, only by protecting the horses, will they have the chance to bet their all on escaping alive, the stables are completely studded in arrows, very dense, not one spot was spared, practically unable to pin point the slightest little slit.

"General, how much longer will we be trapped for? Would Du Cheng send troops over?" Pulling through another round of arrows, the soldier squatted in the front row, pushes the corpses of their comrades to a vacant spot, unable to refrain from asking this, his voice unable to be suppressed.

Knowing the next round of attacks is instantly coming, Lin Rui En turns around, just about to snap at them, but in that very moment he turns, he finds all the soldiers looking towards him with a type of bright and sincere look in their eyes, some soldiers were hit with arrows on their arms and legs, his hands tightly clenches, mournful anticipation to survive actually carried within their agony, blood endlessly oozing out from their wounds.

"Will come.....reinforcements from Du Cheng will come when night falls....."
That ice cold voice firmly says, Lin Rui En waves his hand in signal of having the

soldiers take on defensive positions well. Under the iron shields, several soldiers reveals a smile, just like the only light that can be seen within this darkness.

Face expressionless as he turns around, a look of pain emerges on Lin Rui En's face. With the doubled weight of such psychological torture, the soldiers' willpower is already tightened to the highest point.....Du Cheng did not even send any news of reinforcement, these words he cannot possibly let out his mouth, no matter what, the defence troops in Du Cheng only adds up to over twenty thousand, Military Advisor will not take the risk in sending troops over, the current situation is everything they must face.

Waiting, only waiting can do, with the Nu army going all out right now, they are impossible to stop, as long as they wait once, once and again, again and again, till they have exhausted their strengths, would they gain the opportune moment to breakout, and before that, he must have the soldiers persevere under the attacks of the Nu army, and not be defeated.

The arm propping up the shield is already slightly numb, Lin Rui En ignores this feeling, silently listening for any movements coming from the front, the palm of his hand oozing with flowing sweat, with full concentration, he prepares to face any unexpected situations.

This one battle, will definitely be *the* most menacing battle faced in his entire life.

Ear suddenly catching onto the sounds of quiet weeping, without even looking back, he can guess the youngsters has met with such dangers for the first time, thus venting out their fear of death. Heart shaken, his one hand clenches onto the handle of his sword, tightly gritting his teeth, such demeanour much more chilling than that of ice.

Waiting.....

Night falls, everything falls into silence, the Nu Army ignites their torches, Lin Rui En overlooks the mountain plains, taking the sight of firelights tightly winding around like a giant python into his eyes, lasting for around more than six hours of attacks, the Nu army also enters a state of temporary rest.

The opportunity has finally come.

Eight thousands young soldiers quietly gets moving within the darkness, pulling the horses out from the stables, organising the weapons they will be armed with, and even pulled out the arrows from all over, adding it to their own arrow quivers, to them, at this very moment, arrows is the most abundant form of weapon they have. Their movements very orderly, despite being in the depths of darkness, they show not even a trace of panic.

Lin Rui En silently watches everyone's movement, in such pitch black darkness where one cannot even trace the outline of their own hands, he sees every single person's expressions, looking at those cheeks that still displayed innocence this past noon, already completely covered with the vicissitudes of life, experiencing a situation of life and death, has allowed them to mature into real soldiers, an air of murderous chills flowing in the darkness, spreading across the entire mountain slope.

"General." The lieutenant runs up to Lin Rui En's side, handing him a strong bow, a powerful crossbow, taking out a fire lighter from his waist side, a sound of "suo—", lights the front end of the crossbow.

Lending this little lighting, Lin Rui En clearly gets a look of the eight thousand young soldiers standing before the mountain slope, they are already tired, but their current spirits remains high, there are still the corpses of their brothers on the ground, some whose blood not yet dried, they could even smell the faint bloody stench in the air. No one lowers their heads to look, just like how they have already stepped across this obstacle of life and death, lowering the head is a weakness, they are not permitted to live in this scene of the darkest night.

The biting chill weighs heavy, wind like ice blades. Every single soldier steadily looks towards their commander, the lights in their eyes like a torch, brightly shining on.

These eyes are clearly the dark ruthlessness of wicked wolves.....thinking this, Lin Rui En faintly raises the corner of his lips, carrying a confident smile, under the encouragement of this smile, the soldiers senses a type of excitement never known to them before, since earlier when Lin Rui En made all early arrangements, having predicted the enemy's moves, he had already earned their

respects like worshipping a heavenly deity, right now, they have even more discovered, that when this cold as iceberg general smiles, turns out he can also be this beautiful.

"Du Cheng still has your elderly fathers, kind-hearted mothers, has your wives and children whom you all dearly miss......want to see them?" Slowly speaking up, Lin Rui En pulls the bow, the string forming a full moon, seeing every solder's face grow even brighter, he speaks more sharply, "Then live on for me.....return to Du Cheng alive."

Amongst the frosty chills of the "sa—" sounding wind, an additional spot of light enters the sky of black ink, piercing through half a mountain of heavy silence, just like a brilliant shooting star falling from the sky. Hitting onto the stable, which had already been piled with flammable straws, in an instant, red light rising everywhere, dying half the sky.

Everyone there knows there is no road they can retreat to, eight thousand people aligned into a team, in a knife-like form, those in the front row holding iron shields, raised to chest level of those sat on horses, following behind were the foot soldiers, tightly arranged into a team, with long handled weapons in hand, even the dark night is filled with such biting chill of murderous intent. The entire team extremely tightly packed, accelerating in speed as they charge downhill. Wanting to take advantage of the enemy whilst they're unprepared, like a sharp knife piercing into the heart of their camp, cutting off the dot to dots of firelights forming an encirclement, only then would they have the slightest chance of escaping south.

By the time the Nu Army discovers something's not right, Lin Rui En's team had already charged up to their faces, the Nu Army lights the torches, their objective obvious, yet the army of eight thousand were like wild wolves amidst the dark night, no trace no tracks, ready to bite with one pounce at any given time, brightly playing along with the darkness, completely unexpected.

The sounds echoing throughout the mountain plains.

This is a battle of the lesser attacking the greater, a rush to kill, not counting what means, not counting life and death, the front row of soldiers rapidly charges forward on horse, charging into the unprepared Nu Army ranks, hacking

at anyone they see, the neck, the head, the rupture of muscles and bones, such pitiful cries like the grieving of wild beasts as they scream out, instantly spreads throughout the entire mountain plains, not one person cannot hear it.

This is the exacting of vengeance, a dispute whereby blood must be shed in order to resolve it, it is inevitable, and everyone is giving their all to rip the enemy into shreds, amongst the darkness there are battle flags, only the enemy exists in their eyes.

The eight thousand soldiers floods forward, Lin Rui En riding at the forefront, one hand raises, one blade cuts down, the shine of the long handled sword flashes by, bringing with it a stream of blood, spraying out on the ground, one person throws himself forward, and immediately suffers a neat blow to the neck, head already rolling down with a sound of "gu-lu", body still holding the posture of rushing forward, the enemy troops thus steps on the bodies of their comrades as they advance forward, so he once again makes another swift swipe of his blade, arms flying out, shrill cries endlessly entering the ears, the entire way forward, they are constantly treading through blood and stepping on corpses as they advance.

The murderous air spreads, chaotically stirring together a brutal battlefield^[1], blood splattering all over, staining clothes red, even more so dying the eyes red, everyone has practically lost their senses. Unconsciously waving around those weapons that are capable of killing, striking down the enemy. Sound after sound of unbearable pain and screaming, were a kind of auditory stimuli, arousing the soldiers' inner cruelty and violence.

Killing became the norm, became the necessity, became the greed......

Should the enemy not die, then the one to die will only be oneself, not one soul is able to stop here, one stop, and they shall forever remain on this land for eternity......

He is a butcher, this is hell.....

Executing those around him, Lin Rui En's heart set on fire, spurring him forward, the blood splattering on his face, no longer holds the original warm and wet feeling, numbing senses grows brutally cruel. The people behind gradually decreases, comrades one by one swallowed up in the merciless hellfire, corpse

and bones non-existent, used as a stepping tool by other soldiers.

Corpses littered everywhere.....whilst slashing down the enemy, he closely watches the battle situation, Lin Rui En knows he himself is about to lose, even if the battle strategy this time is near perfect, even though he took to all means, even though all soldiers exerted their best of efforts, it is still unable to change the outcome of this battle, the difference in strength really is far too great......

Looking ahead, the area where the firelights forms a circle is already at a very short distance away, further charging across half this mountain valley, then they will be able to escape from the mountain path, heading straight to Du Cheng, with just only this little bit of distance, looking at it right now, it has already become a void dimension, impossible to cross, the end of the road, it seems like the dead end of heroes.

"Ah——" Lin Rui En abruptly lets out a tragic cry, one strike of the long handled sword, the entire shoulder along with the arm, is hacked off the enemy before his horse, blood spraying onto his armour, and his battle mount crosses over the body of the dead person.

Up to this very moment, did he only just realised, he himself actually doesn't want to lose, clearly aware there are no eternal victories on the battlefield, loudly laughing as he advances forth, killing all in his way. Those following him grows less and less, yet the Nu Army seems like a steadily running stream, tide after tide rushing over......

Great...great...great...today, allow him to kill to his heart's content then, only ceasing upon death.

In this moment of chaos amongst the firelights, he suddenly sees such occasion of fire dropping from the heavens, tumbling down from several nearby hills, the light reflecting across half the sky. And the commotion it caused in the Nu Army is even greater, burning fire falling from the heavens, falling in target of that one tent standing in centre of the Nu Army, the Nu soldiers in complete panic, yelling at the top of their lungs as they run towards that direction.

"General—" The lieutenant emits a quaking cry.

[&]quot;It's General, it's General....."

Startled by that shrill scream, from his waist there comes an immensely stinging pain, Lin Rui En turns to look back, a Nu soldier grins at him, those eyes holding seeming satire, seeming ridicule, his long handled sword makes a turn, neatly swiping across the Nu soldier's neck, that moment happened so fast, that Nu soldier practically didn't even have the chance to show an expression of shock before falling along with that bloodstained sword.

His waist burning hot like fire, Lin Rui En smiles towards the front, all colours brightly reflected within his pupils, hastily sweeping his eyes across the entire area, he can already make out, the reinforcements are not at all many, that sky-of-fire surprise attack is only able to be used to confuse the enemy, as to why the Nu soldiers are so worried for the area the sky fire fell towards, he needs not to think it over, the current confusion caused by the sky fire can only hold on like a flash in the pan, and they, have actually gotten an additional chance of survival, only by seizing this opportunity, can they hope to charge out of this heavy encirclement.

"Kill—charge out."

Hearing this sound of command, with not the slightest of hesitation, the soldiers rapidly gathers, legs clamping the horses' body, they leap forward.

Due to the sudden appearance of sky fire throwing the Nu Army into chaos, this gave Lin Rui En the perfect opportunity. Long handled sword plunging into the chest of the Nu soldier who was blocking his path, the moment the blood sprayed like a blooming flower, he takes on the posture of clearing the way, courageously advancing forward.

The soldiers receives encouragement, within the dark charms of night, only the Nu Army's hundreds and thousands of torches scatters halos above their heads, these firelight are practically more terrifying than the darkness itself, blurring everyone's sights and thus impacting everyone's confidence, amongst the endless killings, they cannot see hope, hands numb, once again raising, blade after blade, striking at the enemy, until fresh blood dyes the entire ground red as it drips.

The enemy one by one falling, their accompanying comrades one by one falling, the soldiers waves their long handled swords like machines, blood trailing

down the edge of the blade as it drips, very quickly disappearing into the darkness. A vast expanse of pains and sorrow spreading through the air, in this brutal battlefield^[1], they have not even the time to feel the pain, following Lin Ru En as they desperately charge forward with their all. Only that leading figure on the horse, gives them their only hope, even if their beings are swallowed in the chaos, they can still see that figure open up a bloody path with a single blade, he is towering like a mountain, with unwavering firmness, blood splatters flying by his side, the light of blade, the shadow of sword, nothing able to shake him in the slightest, seeing such a scene, the soldiers stood amongst the killings suddenly understands one fact, this cold as ice young general, on battlefields like this, blade by blade, sword by sword, hovering between life and death, colder than that of ice, stronger than that of iron, inheriting the blood of the Lin Clan, guarding the greater half of this country.

The frosty wind biting cold, lifting wave after wave of bloody stench in the air.

The incomparably brutal killings continues on repeat, hearts gradually growing numb, the sound of rumblings endless, difficult to make out whether it is the enemies' cries, or whether it is one's own heartbeat, Lin Rui En looks towards that mountain trail, already at a closer distance, as long as they charge past that final round of encirclement, they will be able to escape from this siege, lending the dark night to escape far from danger......

It is but a small amount of distance left.....

A sharp whistling sound pierces through the air, shattering the sound of wind, such sound caused by a lightning fast speed that follows behind, Lin Rui En shifts his body to the left with peerless agility, his body makes a sudden move on the horse, the spear that came flying towards him, practically skims past his scalp, a sort of wet warm fluid comes dripping down his face, his body abruptly oozing with cold sweat due to the fright, taking a little peek back, the lieutenant who is closely following behind was just about to call out something, when his body quakes, Lin Rui En sees himself, whole body covered in blood, all that is reflected in the lieutenant's enlarged pupils, and just like that, the lieutenant's stick straight body stiffens, overturning as he falls off the warhorse.

The corpse very quickly trampled into pieces by the battle mounts behind......

The Nu Army's hundreds of thousands troops actually letting an army of a mere eight thousand breakout from their sieging, they are both angry and in panic, eyes personally witnessing Lin Rui En about to breakout from their encirclement, obeying the commander's orders, they use all their might in throwing their spears towards the direction they are about to breakout the siege, unable to care for how many comrades they are also accidentally harming within the darkness.

Lin Rui En feels everything blur before his eyes, the sharp pain at his waist invading his body, all before his eyes appears to be so unexpected, so strange, the soldiers following behind falling one by one, very quickly disappearing amongst the inferno of all this killing, he raises his hand, sword dancing into a web of blades.

Before him is only this little amount of distance, how is he to possibly resign himself.....?

In front, comes another burst of endlessly raining arrows, Lin Rui En is currently making a protective blade barrier, sound of howling cutting through the air, the rain of arrows passes over the Lin Army ranks, shooting towards the Nu Army that are following behind them.

Lin Rui En is stunned, raising his head with difficulty, he looks towards the mountain trail in front.

In one corner of the mountain trail, several torches are lit up, fifty people aligned into a small squad, spread out in form of a crescent moon, hands endlessly shooting out arrows, blocking the pursuing soldiers behind the Lin Army. At the rear end of the troops is a pale figure sat high up on a horse, under the flickering firelight of the torches, long hair like black ink combed up into a bun, appearance like white porcelain, of extraordinary noble elegance.

In that very moment, Lin Rui En was practically suspecting himself of seeing illusions, the sword increasingly heavy in hand, the pain faintly invading the body from his waist, from time to time, the ears catching sounds of people roaring, horses neighing, all of this, seeming to have drifted very far from him.

In a moment of haze, he vaguely sees the mountain valley below Feng Qi Slope, lush green all around, vibrantly intricate flowers like embroidery works, the

gurgling sound of water, everything the same as back then, all of this as though it is the scene right before his eyes, is this brutal hell of a battlefield a dream? Or is the person before him a dream?

"General—" Amidst the chaos of military forces, he clearly hears the sound of this extremely crystal clear cry, within his eyes, there reflects the image of her anxiously waving her hand, his heart feeling as though a knife came twisting in, gives rise to a throbbing sensation that comes surging up in spirals as it drills into the bottom of his heart.

With soldiers in panic, horses in chaos, such battlefield of wailing and despair, countless faces zooms by before him, there's enemies, there's friends, as they flash past his mind, all becomes blurred, growing increasingly distanced and faint until disappearing without a trace, only that waiting figure at the mouth of the path, is so perfectly clear, occupying all of his sight.

His hope for survival suddenly makes an infinite growth, the running warmth in his heart like tidal waves, legs clamping the horse's torso, he speeds away, right hand armed with a blade, where the hand falls, the light of blood will definitely be seen, displaying such awe-inspiring vigour, he courageously dashes ahead, no longer having the will to die altogether.

Blood red fills the sky......

One man guards the pass, thousands men stands not a chance.....

The moment she sees Lin Rui En, Gui Wan suddenly understands the meaning of this phrase. The usually extremely cold and indifferent young general, right now with dishevelled hair, blood leaking all over his face, onto his armour, his clothes, his pants, as though his entire person had been fished out from a pool of blood decoction, not one spot has been spared from bloodstains, with a face of solemnity, chillingly horrifying, such wild way of killing, causing not a single body to be standing within three meters radius from him, not one surrounding soldier did not expose a look of terror, the Nu Army that had always been commonly known as strong and courageous throughout the world, all stands stiff, looking just like they're seeing a ghost or a monster as they stare at Lin Rui En, avoiding his terrifying madness and brutality, although they are richly experienced in being on the battlefield, their bodies having gone through hundreds of battles,

but never have they come across such imposing vigour of ten thousand Buddhas punishing all, crimson red blood, grim expression, invincibly fierce and sharp wielding of the blade—this very scene has been deeply imprinted into the Nu Army's nightmares.

Even from within the darkness, one can still clearly see the blinding light of the long handled sword, hear the clashing metals of blades, clamouring into the eardrums with a stinging "kuang-si" ring, is this what war is?

The churning in her stomach endless, Gui Wan suppresses the urge to vomit, forcing herself to remain calm, the sweat from her forehead drips down, teeth lightly chattering, yet another sound of heart-wrenching cry drills into the ears, she wanted to instinctively cover her ears, yet her hands were held back by the aching numbness, refusing to listen to instructions as they gently tremble, she wanted to close her eyes, but as though possessed, her eyes are forced to stare straight ahead, her pupils faithfully recording such scene of foul wind and bloody rain.

Such a battlefield of slaughtering.

Tightly gripping onto the reins, Gui Wan forces herself to tolerate the discomfort, watching Lin Rui En charge out that last round of encirclement, a large number of Nu soldiers still following behind his horse, she immediately shouts out: "Release the arrows!" Voice slightly hoarse and unsmooth.

The arrows continuously shooting towards the pursuing Nu Army, under this shielding, the last wave of the Lin Army finally breaks out from the siege, lightning-fast galloping as they head towards Gui Wan's location. The crescent shaped archer unit immediately disperses, giving way to a form a path, Lin Rui En slightly slows down the horse, looking back, to find the soldiers have already reformed their original crescent moon shape form, pulling out their sabres, an appearance of wanting to put up a desperate fight, such sight makes his heart receive a fright.

Gui Wan had already rode her horse up to his side, her face pale white like paper, grudgingly opening her mouth: "General, they volunteered to do so, should you still not leave, then their good intentions shall be forsaken." For this rescue mission, she had used fifty people to confuse the enemy, the burning

firewood, shooting towards Ye Li's tent from the top of two hills, right now, another fifty people are to remain behind, those that have been brought here, will all be buried here, she could only feel the astringent bitter pain in her chest, rubbing in a type of desolation that leaves oneself and others filled with grievances.

The mourning within her words goes without saying, Lin Rui En does not hesitate, nor does time allow for him to waste, as he decisively raises the horse whip, along with Gui Wan and the rest of the soldiers, he speeds down the small path heading to Du Cheng.

In heaven's recording of the fifth year, the first of the second month, Battle of the Jade Governor, the first battle, Lin Rui En with only eight thousand military strength, charges out from the sieging of the Nu Army, this battle being the most dangerous in his entire lifetime, also the most legendary, with generations of people discussing it in great relish. But when escaping, amongst the eight thousand young soldiers, only over thirty remains, the severity of this battle, can be seen in this.

Recorded in the {{Lin Clan Records}}: In heaven's recording of the fifth year, the second month, the Nu's main troops of several hundred thousands, invades Du Cheng from the south, entrapping En and a small group within the mountain valley, eight thousand Lin soldiers shocked in terror, the Nu Army launches arrow attacks, En endures such disgrace and stands firm. During the resting Nu soldiers' time of negligence, with an abrupt rise in revolt, Lin charges forth in advancing, encouraging the soldiers to follow his lead, first cutting off the retreat path himself, in order to raise the army morale, then executing a surprise attack, urgently attacking the Nu's encirclement. The Lin Army fearless, with outnumbered troops. This battle was a huge uproar, golden drums quaking the skies, streaming blood flying past, En's sole blade clears the way, in direction of their escape route, beheading all Nu soldiers in his way, the Nu Army greatly alarmed, everyone's courage running cold, not one general stepping three inches out, not one soldier stepping three steps forward.

Facing a powerful army's siege, thousands beheads the tigers and wolves, the clattering of a tiger's courage, does not get better than this, such heroic aspirations, is peerless in this world.

The moment Lin Rui En breaks out from the siege, Nu King Ye Li stands outside the tent watching the soldiers put out the flames, hearing the reporting from the messenger soldier, immediate anger surges up his heart, the Nu Army had entrapped Lin Rui En with a force full of power and grandeur, yet they actually let him charge out of the heavy sieging with a mere eight thousand military strength, the Nu Army's death and injury count totalling up to more than twenty thousand, "peng—" a heavy punch hitting the wooden pillar outside the tent, his face turning sullen, seeming to assess his thoughts, he makes a prompt decision: "Quickly prepare the horses, guarding officers to immediately follow me in pursuit."

Several generals surrounds him, fighting to speak their words of persuasion first: "Sire, this isn't right ah, a desperate foe must not be pursued, besides, Du Cheng has already been surrounded, they cannot last another few days....."

One jump onto the great horse, led over by the soldier, Ye Li's angered face looks towards everyone, a whip in mid-air, shocking the surrounding generals to move out the way, he loudly shouts: "Before daybreak, Lin Rui En must be put to death, definitely cannot allow him to flee back to Du Cheng."

The Nu King's personal soldiers—the guarding officers with Ke Zhan as leader, immediately closely follows after the Nu King's horse, Ye Li hastily commands the deployment of troops in order to completely siege Du Cheng, before leading more than a thousand troops to swiftly pursue Lin Rui En, taking the route from a deep slope of a mountain path, directly rushing to Du Cheng.

Leaves fade, flowers withers, it is originally the bleak winter season, with the morning rays still shallow, light fog filling the air, all appears misty as though covered by a veiled curtain, Gui Wan's horse smoothly dashes ahead, not a thing from roadsides entering the eyes, sitting through the bumpy ride on the horse, she stares attentively at Lin Rui En, the crease between her brows deepening, the weariness on her jade-like face unable to hide her state of panic.

When Lin Rui En had managed to escape, she had already discovered his body carries countless spots of red, his left shoulder, arms, thighs, all covered with dozens of wounds, big and small, but all of these are not at all fatal, so why does

he seem to be withholding some sort of sharp pain, several times he had almost fallen off the horse, could it be......

Not daring to think too much into it, Gui Wan's heart bursts into feelings of grieving and sorrow, hundreds of feelings swarming into her heart, the three months period, she originally thought it will pass within a blink of an eye, who knew worldly matters would fool around with people, encountering such dangerous situation. To her surprise, she suddenly thinks back to the blizzard in the Capital, the snow drifting all over the skies, he cruelly breaks apart from her hand, the warmth of his fingers coiling around her heart, one touch leading to a heart filled with grievances.....gritting her teeth, be it pain, be it sorrows, no matter how tough it gets, she shall still await for news of him.

"General—" Seeing Lin Rui En's body sway, Gui Wan softly calls out, Lou Sheng rides up to him first, seeing Lin Rui En's eyes turn bleary, face looking wan, greatly startled, he stands stunned, unable to utter a sound.

"It's nothing." Forcefully pushing out those two words with incomparable difficulty, Lin Rui En practically exhausted all the energy in him, the piercing pain at his waist depleting his lucid mind, right now, everything before him blurs into white, a scene of haziness, he already gets a great sense that he can no longer push on any further.

Realising the abnormality in the situation, Gui Wan's heart fiercely tightens, immediately ordering to slow down the speed, before jumping off the horse, Lou Sheng had already stopped Lin Rui En. The soldiers that had just escaped death all became aware of such uneasiness, all dismounting from their horses.

The pacing of her steps extremely heavy, Gui Wan step by step walks up to Lin Rui En's horse, where he is still sitting in an upright posture, she takes a deep breath, gently calling out: "General....."

This soft melodic voice like the sound of clear running mountain streams, calls backs his wandering mind, turning his head, he looks down at Gui Wan who is watching him from the horse's side, those reddish eyes, the surfacing of tears, is for him?

Uncertainly extending his quivering hand, seeing the loose hair scattered by the side of her cheeks, he brushes them away, to find that Gui Wan did not avoid him, he actually feels somewhat overjoyed, touching up onto her face, a scarlet red mark is subsequently swept onto her delicate skin, his heart bursting into panic, as he uses his fingers to wipe away the bloodstain, but finds the bloodstain growing bigger and bigger, and only then did he discover his very own pair of hands are completely stained in blood......heart overcome with dejection, he freezes the gesture, when his hand is met with sudden warmth, wet droplets of crystal water has dripped onto his hand, he looks over in surprise, seeing Gui Wan's lips gently open, seeming to be saying something, yet he is unable hear it clearly, why.....

"General, please hold on, we're immediately about to arrive at Du Cheng, you see, the city walls are already in sight......" Gui Wan's tone choking back as she speaks, wanting to call back Lin Rui En's easing consciousness, when she gets no response from him, her heart stings in pain, raising her head to meet his eyes, that type of intrinsic brilliance seems to have already turned faint, face of ice-like indifference has also dissipated, leaving behind what seems to be tenderness...... the loving affection she has always seen in Lou Che's eyes, suddenly appears within Lin Rui En's orbs, Gui Wan is slightly stunned, the northern winds harshly blows, but her senses has already gone numb, yet the palm of his hands carries its own type of warmth, a bitterly sour feeling rises within her, and she could no longer suppress the tears pouring out her eyes.

Why cry? Lin Rui En's fingertip catches those teardrops like a string of pearls, even he himself doesn't know why, at the same time his body gradually grows cold, he still feels so warm in his chest, bursts of warmth spreading from his palm into his heart, causing him to have difficulty in understanding why his heart feels pained, yet also feels traces after traces of happiness.

She shouldn't be crying.....he already broke out from the heavy encirclement did he not? He still needs to protect Du Cheng, as well as her and the greater half of this country, protecting them altogether.....under the siege of that powerful army, that type of extreme desire to escape from danger, is just as strong as how much the other soldiers want to return home. Clearly aware that within the Lin Estate, his older sister is no longer there, back home there is no longer anyone to inquire for his wellbeing^[2], but he still looks forward to returning......

He was wrong.....from beginning to end, he was always in the wrong, he

should not have soft-heartedly paid for the bill when they first met, he should not have protected her down to the most thorough consideration at Feng Qi Slope, he should not have been unable to bear her sorrows, bending down to pick up the handkerchief for her.....he is wrong to such outrageous extent, even worse that he greedily fell in love with her, loving a woman that does not even belong to him.

How could he have been so foolish? Foolish to the point, that to this very moment, he clearly knows of his own wrongs, yet he still has no regrets, seeing her tears, it is worth it......

Even if he is wrong, it is still worth it.....

Such scalding tears, fingers gliding across Gui Wan's face, Lin Rui En tenderly spreads a blooming smile, he suddenly comes to understand one thing, that day he went to pick up his older sister's corpse, the meaning behind the smile her face withheld. Sight gradually blurring, a grey shadow looming over, the whole world abruptly loses its glory, as he tries his best to open his eyes, but is unable to exert any strength no matter how much effort he puts in.

Tired, he is too tired.....should take his rest now.

His entire lifetime, depleted on horseback, slaughtering countless enemies, with such illustrious military success, he sits high up on the horse, looking down on the world, with his body of flesh and blood, he protects the greater half of the country, his home, his nation, the world. He protected countless families, yet he himself has none, he has no wife, no children, nor does he have any more relatives left in this world, his every blade and sword, his bloodstained battle gear, what has all of this came in exchange for?

He suddenly really wants to live life all over again, if there is this chance, he will not choose to spend his life on horseback, he wants to personally plant some flowers, having nothing better to do but look up at the blue sky, if he is able to meet her again, what else would he want to do for her? Shelter her from the wind and rain, hold up the umbrella for her, accompany her in slowly walking down that little asphalt street, listening to her laughter filled talking.

Hot blood flows out from the wound at his waist, eyelids uncontrollably closing slowly, the world gradually sinking into darkness.....

Ears hearing the hurried horse hooves, around a thousand people, he really wants to open his eyes, to personally tell her this. Hot tears escapes from the corner of his eyes, no matter how much he wishes to open his eyes, he no longer has the strength to do so.

He suddenly feels unwilling, originally thought there is nothing for him to hang onto, but only now does he realise, here, there is still someone he is so dearly attached to.

So unwilling.....

"General—" Such a shrill sound of mournful cry, Gui Wan wants to reach out to support his falling body, but all is in vain, as she personally witnesses Lin Rui En overturn from the horseback, heavily falling into the snow. He carries a faint smile, tears falling from the corner of his eyes, hit with such heart-breaking pain, Gui Wan chokes back her sobs.

His armour that has long been dyed blood red, is glowing black, blood gushing out from his left waist, penetrating the snow, a striking sight of brilliant red.

This cold like frost general, thus abandons the realm of the living, Gui Wan suddenly finds it unacceptable.

What kind of outcome is this considered? She cannot possibly accept this, several times he has saved her from times of crisis, she still owes him so much saving grace, yet to return his favour, yet he gives her no chance......

Wailing cries rising all around, the surrounding soldiers could not refrain from wailing out loud, this person who led them out from that slaughtering hell, has now closed his eyes, their hope, Du Cheng's hope, instantly collapses.

The northern wind unaware of their sorrows, lowly howling as it passes by, the wind and snow carrying a biting chill, paining her eyes as it scrapes past, half squatting her body, she desperately tries to lift him up, he is a famed general who carried the world, how could he possibly be left fallen here so desolately? He is a hero, and should be enjoying the support of the people as he enters the city, she cannot not let his corpse be exhibited in the wilderness, definitely cannot.

Lou Sheng silently comes forth to help her, having just stepped forward one

step, a piercing howl sounds amongst the wind, coming lightning fast, he extends his hand to shield Gui Wan from the front, whilst shouting out: "Careful."

The sound of tearing muscle so clear, Gui Wan blankly looks towards Lou Sheng, on his arm there is actually an arrow plugged in, blood dripping out, dripping onto Lin Rui En's battle gear, looking at the position, the arrow seems to be deliberately targeting Lin Rui En. Gui Wan's body trembles in rage, her heart aching in pain, widening her eyes as she glares towards the sudden arrivals.

It's her!

Truly, definitely her!

Why would she appear here? That fair face covered in bloodstain, pale blue clothing dyed blood red like plums, just that, that pair of clear orbs that had always contained a faint smile, in this very moment, is colder than that of ice, within the look of dismal, stabbing into him is a deep sense of hatred.....

It's killing intent! Ye Li is thoroughly stunned by such killing intent with not the slightest attempt of covering up, staring ahead dumbfounded, he notices a well-built figure, that man carrying sword scars on his face, protectively standing in front of Gui Wan and Lin Rui En, further taking a closer look at the state of the person lying on the ground, he too is able to guess the truth. The original plans of deployment are shattered by this strange scene before his eyes, and at this moment, he does not know what choice he should make.

The person he has always dreamt of is right before his eyes, and she is actually holding such look of seeing her sworn enemy, as she coldly glares at him, causing him to not dare make a move, he has once dreamt of countless different scenarios of their reunion, but not one is as shocking as the one he faces right now. Abruptly discovering he is holding up the bow and arrow against her, he slowly lowers his hand, the Nu soldiers also puts down their bow and arrows.

Ye Li opens his mouth, wanting to say something, two years filled with all sorts of longing, such love that has already been engraved into his bones, in the past he has thought of thousands of words to say, but all is stuck in his throat when met with her sharp eyes, finding it difficult to utter a sound, he wants to take a step forward, but finds that even this is of great difficulty.

Only now does he come to realise, separating him and this woman is not in fact a mere few meters of distance, but is a great divide, such that is mixed with the boundaries of two nations, a step away, yet so far apart.

No longer caring for Ye Li and his party, Gui Wan and Lou Sheng together, lifts Lin Rui En's corpse onto the horseback, turning to command everyone to get on their horses, under watchful eyes, the cornering of a thousand, they leave in a calm and composed manner, not giving the slightest care to the Nu Army's prying eyes of a tiger.

"Sire....." Ke Zhan loudly shouts, looking strangely towards Ye Li, unable to understand why, under such a great opportunity, they are simply letting them walk free, one should know, even if it is Lin Rui En's corpse, it is still of extreme value to take it back.

A wave of a hand shutting up the soldiers, Ye Li stands amongst the snow and wind, eyes seeing Gui Wan and her party leave, he knows, he and she, no longer has any hope in this lifetime, just now, the resoluteness in her eyes have clearly reminded him of this point.

He and she, are separated by too many things, be it the opposing stands of two nations, be it the shedding of blood between clashing soldiers, be it the death of Lin Rui En, that divided them into two worlds, affinity leading down an estranged path.

Just that he, still cannot bear it.

Cannot bear pointing the arrow.....

"Sire....." Ke Zhan walks up to him, seeing their brilliant and wise king driven to distraction right now, both eyes blank, seeming to hold yearning, also seeming to hold remorse.

Grievingly letting out a heavy sigh, Ye Li turns around, the snow slowly descends, melting on contact with his face, ice cold to the point of holding not a trace of feelings, he rigidly speaks up to set a command: "Tell the main forces to siege Du Cheng, have them surrender within three days, refusal to do so, kill!"

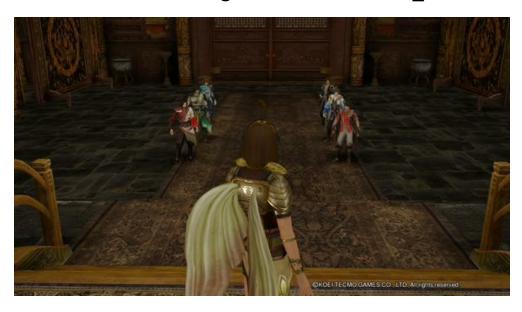
- Xiū Luō zhàn chǎng / 修罗战场—a phrase deriving from Buddhism, Shura—not to be mistaken for Asura from indian mythology—spent his lifetime with warring as his objective, Shura's battlefield refers to the death match pitted between two sides, people often uses "Shura's battlefield" to describe the brutality of the battlefield. Which later extends out to the meaning of "when a person goes through a desperate plight, they will go through the struggle of battling against death"—such that they lose all humane senses in face of death as there is nothing else to fear at this point, hence the taking to all brutal means to survive.
- [2] The original phrase for **inquiring for one's wellbeing** is **xū hán wèn nuǎn /** 嘘寒问暖 which literally translates to **asking whether you feel cold in winter, asking whether you feel hot in summer**.

sigh the tragic fate of the Lin siblings. The way General Lin described his life as the protector of the country really hit me, how he was responsible for keeping so many families safe yet he himself has no family T__T

And no matter how much Gui Wan loves Lou Che, you cannot deny that in her heart, there is always special place for the general, holding all these little bits of memories, whether it is out of gratitude, out of guilt, out of anything else other than romantic feelings, he still holds a special place

Full

With our dearest General now gone, I shall not be dragging this on further, I have pretty much finished translating COB and it is just a matter of editing the chapters and posting them up now. *Sigh* right now, the General's death saddens me more than the ending of the novel itself T_T



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Gui Wan

Flowing frost from the sky appears not to be drifting. [1]

The night wind intensifies, blowing against the body with a biting chill, lining the sky is a curtain of snow, spinning in such fluttering manner, descending like the scattered catkins of the willow trees. Gui Wan tightens her hold on her skirt, increasing her walking speed, night is falling, Military Advisor inviting her over right now, must be because the situation has already reached a critical stage. As she silently ponders, touches of coolness lands on her face, she reaches up to gently feel it, traces of water still remains, raising her eyes to sky, thousands and thousands flakes of snows in full bloom, her heart is abruptly hit with pain, the scene of horrifying red amongst the snowy grounds vividly rolls out before her eyes again, and instantly, her breathing shows clear signs of stuffiness, she hurriedly withdraws her line of sight, not daring to look at the snow again.

The big courtyard by the city gates is temporarily made the army's main camp,

commoners who lives near the gates were all moved deep into the city within a day, and so the originally desolate streets, only sees the figures of soldiers right now. The sky shrouded in darkness, the big courtyard dyed in a layer of white, tiles glowing in silver radiance, light grey bricks rendered a gorgeous white.

Harsh conditions of winter chilling, sun of spring nowhere to be seen.

General Lin having left the crisscrossed paths of the mortal world, did he actually take spring away with him as well?

Heart wrung in pain, a sour feeling hitting the tip of the nose, Gui Wan strongly collects her mind, before stepping into the courtyard, a thin and tall soldier awaits inside the courtyard, respectfully saying: "Military Advisor has gave orders, may gentleman follow me." With not another word, he makes a sudden turn, and leads the way.

The two people snakes their way through to the master room, now already converted into the military discussion chamber, along the way, not even half a white banner is seen, nor does the soldier show the slightest look of mourning, Gui Wan creases her brows with doubts, when the soldier's steps comes to a stop, silently standing before the room doors. Gui Wan understands his meaning, and lightly knocks.

"Is it Madam Lou? Please enter." Tone loud yet quivering.

Pushing open the doors, the warm air entangled with worries, inside the chamber is a pan of red burning charcoal, she passes by the fire pan, looking around the inside of the chamber. Stood in centre of the large empty room is a well-made coffin, beside it is a sandalwood burner engraved in silver, and from it light swirls of smoke rises, the scent of sandalwood faint yet drawn out like thread. Looking around in a daze, she is surprised to find Military Advisor's hunched body sitting at a chair, eyes big and round like brass bells, as he stares towards the coffin.

"Military Advisor?" Steps coming to a stop, Gui Wan calls out from three steps distance away.

Turning his head as though he had just awoken from a dream, Military Advisor snaps out of his daze: "Madam Lou.....you've come." With a long sorrowful sigh, he stands up, walking out from the solemnly quiet inner chamber.

Once the lighting hits his face, Gui Wan receives a shock, after a long while does she speak up: "Military Advisor has overworked." Grieving led aging overnight^[2], the desolation shown in his face, one word of gaunt is not enough to describe the bear minimum of it. His past refined self and great confidence, all traces of it completely vanished.

"Madam seems to have received a great shock?" Military Advisor notices the look in Gui Wan's eyes, speaking as though making a joke out of himself, "Deep down, are you suspecting, yesterday I refused to send troops in aid, yet today I am carrying such appearance of fox crying for the rabbit's death, really laughable to the extreme, is that right.....?" Halfway through speaking, he madly laughs aloud, tears unknowingly, unfeelingly, rolling down from his eyes.

"Military Advisor has many concerns, completely thorough in thoughtfulness, General deeply understands your greater meaning, how could we not know....."

Laughter abruptly coming to a stop, Military Advisor looks back, shaking his head at himself: "To this very day and time, I keep it secret, not processing the mourning period, should he know of this in the netherworld, would he not blame me?"

Keep it secret, not processing the mourning period? Gui Wan repeats to herself, arriving in Du Cheng in the early hours of today, having just dismounted the horse, her body was overly exhausted and thus fainted, deeply sleeping for an entire day, could it be that within this one day, Military Advisor had actually not publicly declared General Lin's death?

"Is Military Advisor afraid of causing chaos in the hearts of the soldiers, affecting the army morale?"

Body lightly shudders upon hearing this, Military Advisor graciously sounds a soft sigh: "This is one reason, what's more important is, General Lin has only been here for over three months, the local army here is not under the Lin line, taming the wild horse with harsh training, is good if General is here, should his death be announced in this moment, I'm only afraid Du Cheng would immediately be thrown into chaos."

Gui Wan nods, her knitted brows loosening: "In times of emergency, emergency procedures are to follow, in reality, this too can be considered of

helplessness."

In times of emergency, emergency procedures are to follow, Military Advisor repeats this in his head several times, like the parting of clouds revealing the moon, his heart suddenly feels a lot more relaxed, thinking back to the resentful look in the eyes of those knowing soldiers just now, he spreads a helplessly bitter smile, the woman before him actually understands how to assess the situation better than them, picking up the letter on the table, he places it in front of Gui Wan: "May Madam take a look."

Giving her an important military document? Thinking back to everything she had just said, Gui Wan opens up the letter, it is the Nu Army's declaration of war letter, the content of the letter, says to give Du Cheng three days of consideration time, refusal to surrender, complete annihilation!

Looking to Military Advisor in shock, yet finds him looking into the inner chamber where the coffin lies, deep sorrow difficult to restrain, Gui Wan folds the letter up and place it on the table, asking: "What is Military Advisor planning to do?"

"Facing the Nu Army's full force of several hundred thousand cavalry with less than thirty thousand military strength, in Madam's opinion, what are the odds of winning?"

Gui Wan finds herself speechless in response, that charcoal fire pan suddenly flashes with a spark, a sound of sputter, shocking the heart and mind.

Military Advisor dejectedly slumps into the chair, asking: "Madam must have come to Du Cheng for over a month now right? Could it be Prime Minister Lou is not concerned?"

Brows lightly twitches, Gui Wan is surprised yet doubtful towards him suddenly bringing up such irrelevant matter at a time like this, carefully thinking it over again, she comes to the sudden realisation, answering: "There's still a month's time."

Military Advisor's expressions becomes somewhat heavily solemn: "One month is a little too long, but looking at it now, there is no other choice." Behind Du Cheng lies the thousands of Du mountains range, located in a remote area, and besieged right now, all news completely blocked with not the slightest of

leakage, although he feels there's something strange about all this, he has no way of investigating into it, recalling that Gui Wan is currently within the city, Prime Minister Lou would definitely not leave her here without keeping in touch, the reinforcements issue still holds opportunities to turn things around, but now that he hears of the one month limit......the situation of Du Cheng can be said to be of utmost severity.

"Madam, do you by chance know the key to defending the city?" Military Advisor restores his calm, leisurely speaking, "The first major key to defending the city is for everyone to become one in mind and heart, to look at death like returning home (calmly). The next major key is to be well organised, use people to the best capability, thirdly, there must be no shortage of food, back up supplies are to be sufficiently stocked up, number four, complete defence preparations are required, densely secured with not the slightest opening."

Gui Wan's first time being lectured the principles of military matters, making a good student to educate, as she listens on with deep thoughts. Military Advisor continues to analyse, "Du Cheng has been the land of trading for generations, the city walls firm and strong, rooted into the ground around twenty meters deep, in terms of defences, it is considerably perfect, the merchant shipping here flourishing, in terms of materials, it too is considered sufficient, but within the army right now, there is no longer a leading commander, soldiers and civilians scattered like sand, this is the core of the problem."

"Listening to Military Advisor's words, there's already a solution?" Gui Wan looks at him on guard, speaking to him, one cannot lack the slightest of alertness.

Military Advisor bolts up to his feet, arriving in front of Gui Wan, one hand wrapping his fist in a formal gesture, bowing all the way down: "This matter, if Madam may extend a helping hand again."

The frosty wind softly whistles, snow sounding "sa-sa" as it knocks on the door.

In the early morning, several defending generals of Du Cheng hurriedly rushes to the big courtyard, temporarily made the military headquarters. Their military

boots covered in white, producing sounds as they tread in the snow, resonant and heavy. Meeting in the big courtyard, the usual pleasantries completely thrown aside today, all nodding to one another, is also counted as a greeting.

"Deputy Commander Han, exactly what is going on with General Lin?" Simple and unsophisticated in appearance, a pair of eyes bright and piercing, Du Cheng's city defence officer pulls Han Ze Ming aside, lowering his voice as he asks this.

"Not sure, heard that General has been wounded, now that the city is already heavily besieged with not even a drip of water able to leak out, having spent an entire day's effort of working, General Lin has still yet to show up, I fear his injury is nothing light." Du Cheng's defence officer nods in agreement, face darkening even more.

Several people silently enters the courtyard without a sound, having just stepped into the inner courtyard, a clear melodious sound drifts along amongst the wind, the several people all slows down their steps, attentively listening, there actually seems to be someone singing opera in the room. Zhao Xin's face turns ashen, coldly sounding a harrumph: "Us oldies working hard for the country, no night without holding the spear, yet here someone has invited actors to sing." His skin darkly tanned, born with such fierce and mighty appearance, such that is also harbouring anger right now, thus carrying a demeanour even more so like that of swallow jaw and tiger beard (description of a mighty appearance)^[3], power and prestige coldly flowing.

The other generals were also frowning in great dissatisfaction, increasing their speed as they head towards the room.

The resonant singing amongst the wind become more and more clear. "Thousands upon thousands of hate, in front and behind all mountains. Those by the side say my sedan chair is spacious. Does not say being sheltered by it, [makes it] difficult to look out to him....." [4] Soft overtone-singing gracefully turns, like golden orioles circling the air, seemingly broken seemingly continuous, pulling people's mood into rising and falling. The generals unwittingly slows down their pace, not willing to admit, three points of their souls has been enticed by this aggrieved vibrato. They are all men of great ambitions to guard all

around them, only knowing the way of the blade, where would they have heard such elegantly gentle melody? As they listen and listen, as though walking into the hazily misty rain scene of Jiang Nan, they seem to see a woman leaning on the railing as she looks out, pondering over the unspeakable sorrows, such worries that tugs on the heartstrings of others, such resentment that penetrates every bone of the body, bit by bit dripping into a spring pool, forming circles and circles of ripples, wrapping people inside it.

Like a melody yet not a melody, like a play yet not a play, such voice completely cuts off in between the long vibrato, all the generals felt just like tasting fine wine, yet unable to savour the best of its flavour, before it all spills onto the floor, the lingering aftertaste like a grating itch in the heart. Just when everyone were exchanging glances, their state of surprise at its peak, the singing takes off again, a burst of sound comes from the flat ground, a silver vase abruptly smashed, that tenderly aggrieved tune just now, instantly transforms like a sea dragon leaving the waters^[5], outflowing breath reaching thousands of li.

".....waiting for autumn to come, eighth of the ninth month, once my flowers bloom, hundred flowers perishes. Bursts of fragrance soars the skies as it penetrates Chang'an, the entire city coated in golden armoury!" [6]

The shadow of a sword makes a sudden appearance, rising straight from the ground, a casual sword dance amongst the strong winds, soaring straight on, forceful impact overflowing.

"Great!" A sound of loud exclamation comes from Zhao Xin's mouth, he is originally a rough fellow, not understanding the slightest of scholarly interests, the lyrics in the singing, he does not understand half a point of it, just that these lyrics contains pride like the spreading of a huge eagle's wings, holding deeply hidden implications of loftiness, arousing his heroic spirit as a military person, and upon hearing the singing in the inner chambers "long dormant dragon startled in its sleep, one roar quaking thousands of mountains", he only feels the held back breath in his chest seemingly wanting to follow this melodic singing in voicing this out together, half his life of cherished high aspiration are all expressed within this play, completely exposed......

The doors suddenly open, in the moment everyone regains their lost senses,

from within the chamber, they see the fluttering figure of a bright and clear "gentleman" stepping out, a delicately beautiful jade neck, a slightly pale face, dark orbs like night, whilst moving, wide sleeves opening and closing, a unique charm shines, extraordinarily elegant demeanour, taking a step out, eyes circles around the group of generals, lightly dropping a phrase: "Everyone follow me." Neither urgent nor slow, walking towards the empty room next door.

The group of generals actually follows along in unison, several generals of leading commander level were a little surprised and bewildered, they are all usually figures that roars out without hesitation on the battlefield, only today did they find, some people are of natural born nobility, causing them to inexplicably be subdued.

Waiting for the generals to enter the room, all taking a seat, Gui Wan with not an ounce of modesty, walks up to the host seat, calmly, comfortably sitting down. Causing generals such as Zhao Xin, Han Ze Ming to show faces of dissatisfaction, yet does not rashly say a word.

Right when the room is flowing with an air of bizarreness, curiosity, hesitation and so on, Gui Wan with a sound of "pa—", throws two warrant pendants out onto the floor, in centre of the room. All the generals lowers their heads, one gold, one white, one Lou (楼) one Lin (林).

"I am the wife of Prime Minister Lou, General Lin has suffered a serious injury, not in suitable condition to get up, from today onwards, he shall be operating within camp, I shall be giving orders from the commander tent." Not awaiting for all the generals to ask questions, Gui Wan snatches the opportunity to speak first, in a leisurely manner, with quite the charisma of a commander. She and Military Advisor has discussed overnight, deciding to hide news of General Lin's death, and because Military Advisor holds a low ranked official position, with General Lin's death, he has lost the right to speak out, thus she is to act as commander, Military Advisor is to devise strategies from behind the scenes, and she, is responsible for keeping the all the generals in control.

Therefore, today she is to apply and exhaust her entire body of solutions, first gentle and then unyielding, using the psychological tactic of capturing their hearts and souls, be sure to bring under control everyone's heart and mind alike, in order to resist the enemy together, as long as they hold on for an entire

month, they believe help from the Capital will definitely arrive, although this hope is frail, it is still absolutely necessary to put in their all.

"What?" The first to jump up is Du Cheng's defence officer, his face like hearing the unthinkable, "You a generation of a mere woman, issuing commands on behalf of General Lin, what kind of a joke is this, you think this is as easy as threading a needle?"

Everyone guffaws in unison, Du Cheng's defence officer straightens himself, standing in the middle of the room, acting high and mighty.

Coldly looking at him, Gui Wan neither angry nor laughing, looking straight at him until the Du Cheng's defence officer felt his hairs stand on end, a chill running up his body, before she leisurely says: "Defence Officer Jiang, my post as acting commander is up to General Lin to decide, and not by you, who is the leader here? Could it be you don't understand the concept of superiority and inferiority in a hierarchy?"

All becomes like frozen cicadas, nobody dares to speak, only because the cold of that moon shooting the frosty river came like a shooting arrow, the person before them is clearly one with brows like an ink painting, amusement light and clear, but once the brows twitches, it actually carries a public onslaught that leaves one shivering in the cold, weighing down on the valiant spirits in the room. (The moon here refers to Gui Wan, whilst the river (jiāng / 江) refers to Defence Officer Jiang)

"Madam Lou since you say it is General Lin's orders, then please do invite General Lin out to say a word." Han Ze Ming slowly speaks up, raising doubts like one prick seeing blood.

Indeed as Military Advisor had expected, Han Ze Ming is the toughest one to handle, luckily this question was also within their expectations, Gui Wan turns her face, leisurely asking: "Deputy Commander Han, could it be you think I would pass on false military orders, coming here to play a joke on everyone?"

Such backfiring question extremely sharp, with her superior identity, even if one is to harbour doubts in their heart, they too would not dare to rashly speak of it.

"Since everyone understand the current situation, then do not waste any

time," Right when the generals were all dumbstruck, Gui Wan strikes whilst the iron is hot, finger curling like a hook, knocking on the table top, the soldiers outside were already on standby, hearing the instruction signal, they push open the doors and enters, a military relief map is very quickly spread out before everyone's eyes.

The generals are all people who knows to assess the severity of the situation, throwing aside the idea of making things difficult for Gui Wan, they all set their line of sights onto the map, they recall the several hundred thousands of Nu Army cavalry currently outside the city, one face looking more serious than the other.

Gui Wan slowly walks to the middle of room from the host chair, standing right before the map, silently observing for a while, she finds that not one person is speaking, and thus clearly, coldly says: "If there are no objections, I shall now relay General Lin's strategies." Lightly smoothing her sleeves, displaying a look of casual elegance, finding that all the generals have silently nodded in approval, she spreads an extremely faint smile, in a slow leisurely manner, beginning to talk.

This is originally part of Military Advisor's planning preparations, she spent an entire night listening to it, also practiced for almost two whole hours, for her to be able to display such sense of adeptness. Military Advisor's strategy splits the city defences into four important divisions, food supplies is not a problem, and the foundations of the city walls are firm, with just the need for a little strengthening, it too is not a crucial problem, this time, the Nu Army's "strike where and when the enemy is unprepared" tactic has indeed been executed effectively well, but at the same time, due to wanting to launch a "surprise attack", they have not brought any heavy-duty city invading preparations, this little point, has been firmly grasped hold of by Military Advisor. Du Cheng is to remain dead set on guarding from within the walls, using self-prolonging to outstand the opposing party's short term stay, is indeed extremely wise. And the finer details within all of this, includes distributing supplies to the personnel, and reasonable division of labour. The entire plan can be considered to have taken consideration to all aspects, seamlessly meticulous.

The generals listens on attentively, Gui Wan's voice clearly smooth and

indifferent, between the enunciation of words, there carries a uniquely soft tone found only in the Capital, and she is an eloquent speaker, logical and consistent, with not the slightest ambiguity, so sweet and moving to the ears, that there is actually not one person interrupting her explanation. To the moment of completely explaining the entire plan, the general all gets a sudden feeling, like the clearing of mist and clouds revealing a clear blue sky, as though hope has suddenly appeared before their eyes.

Whispering amongst themselves in discussion, several generals nods their heads from time to time, amongst the whispering, Han Ze Ming deeply frowns, without relaxing, resonantly speaking up in questioning: "General Lin's strategy is indeed thoughtful, but the Nu Army's arrival this time, is clearly premediated, their army morale at its peak, the invasion in two days will definitely shatter the earth and quake the heavens, with such huge difference of power between the two armies, should they achieve their goals in one strike, then would these plans not all be in vain?"

A resounding question, once again sharply pointing out the core problem. The generals finds his point very valid, thus turning their eyes to Gui Wan, awaiting a reply.

Gui Wan maintains a faint smile of sureness, but deep inside she is crying out endless grievances, she too had mentioned this same question yesterday, Military Advisor's strategy targets a month of acting on the defence to counter the offense, but should they come under the attack of the Nu Army's boosted morale, unable to withstand the first wave of attacks, how tragic the consequences will be. Military Advisor thought for a bit, before helplessly saying "then we will just have to resign to our fate". [8]

Resign to our fate.....how is she to throw out these four words to everyone?

"Generals, does anyone have any good plans to resist the enemy?" Gracefully returning the question, Gui Wan turns back to the host seat, averting her gaze from the generals' reactions.

The atmosphere that had only just gained a little uplifting once again drops back down to the starting point, falling into silence. The sound of snow can still be heard knocking at the doors along with the wind, "xi li xi li" it seeps into one's

heart.

Han Ze Ming does not speak again, the most bold and unruly one amongst the generals, Zhao Xin, strongly rubs his hands together, don't know whether it is due to the cold, or due to having no ideas. Gathering the look of the varying expressions into her eyes, Gui Wan lightly presses her lips together, organising her thoughts within the boundless stillness.

Du Cheng's troops only adds up to over twenty thousand, and the Nu Army has as many as hundreds of thousands, such huge difference in strength, causes all the generals who has been through hundreds of battles, remain mute as though their lips a tightly sealed, should the current Du Cheng had a leading army of a hundred thousands, the generals could surely come up with many practical strategies to face the enemy, but right now, even a housewife, cannot cook a meal with no rice.

A pair of hands clasped together, Gui Wan blankly stares at the map in centre of the room, this blotchy map is filled with bruised-like markings, the lines of complication all in one area, also making some symbols with unknown meaning......could this be the frontier? Is exactly where they are currently standing? The thing General Lin fought to death in order to protect......is within such an insignificant map?

Countless soldiers on the battlefield, what the shedding of their blood forged, is not a sword, not a sabre, but is one map like this, or even just that one line of marking on the map, short distances and worlds apart, turns out to be so distinguished.

"Defence Officer Jiang, right now within Du Cheng, how many Nu people remains?" Nonchalantly turning away her line of sight, Gui Wan casually asks this.

Hearing his name, Du Cheng's defence officer jumps up, upon seeing all the generals casting surprised looks, he realises his one sudden movement, had already treated Gui Wan as leading commander, his old face flushes red, and could only respond: "The Nu Tribe merchants groups had already been gradually lessening since a month ago, the amount of Nu people remaining in Du Cheng now is approximately around four hundred." One after another, the generals all

casts him a "since there had already been circumstances of lessening Nu people, why not report earlier" look, directly causing Defence Officer Jiang to freeze on the spot.

Time seems to have already frozen without advancing, there is no brazier within the room, frosty air flowing, looking outside through the windows, a hazy scene of snow, all trees and plants rustling, Gui Wan softly sounds a long gratuitous sigh, within the crisp and sweet sound of breath, there contains numerous types of melancholy.

"Send people to capture all Nu people within the city, regardless of elderly women and children."

"What?" The first to jump up and shout out is the towering Zhou Xin with head as big as a leopard's, eyes big and round, both eyes widening in anger, "They are all ordinary commoners, why capture them?"

The room instantly seems to have suddenly exploded, the originally succumbed generals all reveal a resentful look, Han Ze Ming waves his hand to indicate silence, he sternly locks his gaze onto Gui Wan: "Could it be, we have to use Nu people to resist the Nu army? Such method is too despicable." They are military people, despite two opposing sides at war, captives cannot be easily killed, right now, to actually want to capture Nu people who are only ordinary commoners to threaten the Nu Army, such a strategy is simply an insult to the great and prideful country of Qi Ling.

"The Nu Army morale greatly vigorous, strong and unstoppable, should we not avoid this spearhead, great damage is bound to be inflicted, there is currently no better way than to use the Nu people in order to shake their morale." Plainly laying out a fact.

The room quietens down a little, all generals revealing an expression of deep thoughts, weighing out the stakes at play. Han Ze Ming suspiciously asks: "This is also General Lin's command?"

That calm face of steel-willed indifference flashes a trace of practically undetectable pain, vanishing in an instance, Gui Wan lifts her hand, picking up the brush on the table, brush gliding down the white paper before her, speedily forming words, such that fills the entire paper in a blink of an eye, the generals

were all curious of her movements, not one took their eyes off her. After finishing her writing, she dazedly looks at the paper, loss, pain, conflict...... various emotions circulating in her eyes. Suddenly raising the paper, throwing it to the centre of the room: "This is not General Lin's command, it is my command."

Admission of guilt—all generals sharply eyes the three impressively written words on the paper.

This is not General Lin's command, it is hers! Using the lives of commoners to threaten the enemy army, such damning deed, coming from the hands of Gui Wan. The Nu Army wanting to invade the city, they must first step on the blood of their own, four hundred human lives, old and young, worthless dirt or fellow countrymen, she too would like to see how the Nu Army will respond......

Facing the enemy on the battlefield, real swords real spears, she is incapable of, she does not have General Lin's running streak of triumphant records, she does not have Military Advisor's strategic mind to earn victories from thousands of li away, what she has, are little schemes of psychological trickery. And now, she is to apply this onto the battlefield.

Later generations of notoriety, disgrace, allow her to bear it all.....

She does not know how the later arts^[9] will depict this cruel decision she made today, but today, she is determined to press on.

The stunned generals watches that paper of yet to dry ink lightly drifting like cotton as it lands on the floor, unable to tell how much it is weighing on their hearts, appearance of weariness emerges as they look at Gui Wan, those righteous and severely stern words stuck in their throats. All of a sudden, they actually could not differentiate good and evil, incapable of possibly distinguishing, how much controversy this approach will have, only knowing, that pair of eyes still like deep lake, is as firm as a mountain, proudly chilling like plum blossoms.

Saying no more, the generals accept orders and leaves.

Watching them file out like a stream of fishes, Gui Wan secretly releases a long sigh, slowly standing, her eyes emptily sweeps across her surroundings,

suppressing the astringent feelings filling her chest, she walks out of the room.

Military Advisor was standing right outside the doors, body coated in a thin layer of snow, seeming to have waited for a long time, his expression complex and unpredictable.

Guessing that he had heard the command she issued, she opens her mouth wanting to explain, but Military Advisor turns around, striding away with no concerns, without even turning his head, he throws behind the phrase "in times of emergency, emergency procedures are to follow."

Gui Wan bitterly smiles as she hums a reply, her stomach full of excuses is held back with this phrase, nowhere to put them to use. The sound of movements from the soldiers outside the courtyard gradually changing, gradually sounding, she can practically imagine the scene happening in the streets of Du Cheng.

In a blink of an eye, it is the final night of the Nu Army's stated surrender warning, the night moon like a hook, radiance like melting silver spills across the ground, the view of snow boundless, particularly heart moving.

Tension on the rise, Gui Wan is unable to sleep and walks into the courtyard, hearing the noisy voices outside the walls, the wailing cries amongst them, were especially pricking the ears, like sharp needles shooting into the eardrums. After a moment, the sound of someone singing is suddenly heard, faint and weak at start, drifting in the wind, it spreads extremely fast, seeming to be many people softly singing together. This melody is so familiar, stopping Gui Wan's body that was just about to return to her room, carefully listening, this tune of tender warmth, is precisely the Nu Tribe's "Suo Ge Ta". (Refer to chapter 13 for lyrics)

The reverberating melody lingers, filled with endless sorrows.....

It is this burst of distinctively clear and bright singing, that caused the Nu Army to not dare take any impulsive action for three entire days, their vigorous spirits diminishing, at the same time, when historians of later generations wrote "Chaos of Beauty", this very incident also became the object of defamation, or of criticism.

People often remarked this period as the following: the sieging of Du Cheng and the "Lou Clan Banquet" in the Capital are the most significant events in

heaven's recording of the fifth year, and these two events indirectly altered and guided the future of the imperial court of Qi Ling. The record keepers at the time were unable to use words to record all of this, silently lamenting, such characters that are Prime Minister Lou and his madam, they too do not know how to depict them with brush and ink, words and painting^[9].

- [1] Opening poetry line from <u>Spring Blossoms On The Moonlit River by Zhāng</u> <u>Ruò Xū / 张若虚</u>
- [2] The original words used for **grieving led aging** is **bēi qiū /** 悲秋 which literally translates to **sorrowful autumn**. These words comes from the phrase **shāng chūn bēi qiū /** 伤春悲秋 which translates to **distressed spring [leads to] grieving autumn** a phrase used by ancient Chinese scholars to express the **aging of the body caused by the dispirited soul**.
- [3] **Swallow jaw and tiger beard** or **yàn hàn hǔ xū /** 燕颔虎须 is the description that refers to a mighty appearance, wide jaw and thick beard, the phrase first seen(?) as the description of Zhang Fei's appearance in Romance of the Three Kingdoms. In fact, the description of Zhao Xin's character, practically sounds like a replica of Zhang Fei. The leopard head, round eyes part is also a description used to describe Zhang Fei. All referring to a mighty and fierce look.



Image of Zhang Fei (from Dynasty Warriors)

[4] The song/poem sang by Gui Wan here is called **Song of the South**· **Thousands Upon Thousands of Hate by Xīn Qì Jí /**辛弃疾

[5] **Sea dragon leaving the waters or leaving the sea – jiāo lóng chū hǎi /** 蛟 龙出海 comes from the believes of the ancients, where marine reptiles can grow to become a sea dragon after living five hundred years, holding the power to cause storms and floods, and the sea dragon can later grow to become a mighty dragon after living a thousand years, taking off into the skies, hence leaving the waters/sea.

- [6] The poem/song sang here is called <u>Composing Chrysanthemum [Poem]</u>
 After Failing The Imperial Examination by Huáng Cháo / 黄巢 and actually holds two meanings, whilst one is to portray the magnificence of chrysanthemums, there is also the underlying meaning of an upcoming uprising as the poet is also known throughout history for leading the Huang Chao Rebellion.
- [7] The proverb used for **being sure** or **having everything planned out** is **xiōng yǒu chéng zhú /** 胸有成竹 which literally translates to having a **complete**[image of] of bamboo embedded in one's chest (heart) before painting bamboo, the image of bamboo is already in one's heart.
- [8] The original phrase for **resign to one's fate** is **tīng tiān yóu mìng /** 听天由命 which more accurately translates to **succumb to the heavens and resign to our fate.**
- [9] In ancient China, **painting** can be referred to as **dān qīng /** 丹青 with dān meaning red and qīng meaning blue and/or green. These "paints" are made from mineral pigments and if you look at ancient Chinese paintings, you will find that red, blue and green are the fundamental colours used in them.

Full

[Note: Yuán xiāo / 元宵 – also known as Chinese lantern festival on the fifteen of the first month in the lunar calendar]



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Yun Xiao Banquet

In heaven's recording of the fourth year, year end, the snow in the Capital like descending flowers, drifting across the entire sky, the glamorously bustling Capital City white haired overnight.

(Qin Xun appears in chapter 19, the physician who informs Lou Che of the saffron in Consort Ying's medicine)

Imperial Physician Qin Xun enters the Prime Minister Estate with his head bowed, the winter wind is potentially very strong, giving rise to a biting cold as it brushes against the face, his feet staggers, body swaying, yet seems to not be aware of this at all, continue to quickly pace forward. Arriving at the discussion chamber of the Prime Minister Estate, his face shows slight ease, pushing open the doors upon entering, only seeing that inside the chamber, not only are the three ministries of labour, defence (war), revenues' ministers, but even the one responsible for the Capital's military forces and defence, Commander-in-Chief He

Pei is present.

These four senior officials of the Capital, are either sitting or standing within the discussion chamber, their faces expressionless, in the moment Qin Xun walks into the hall, all inquiring eyes were casted on him, nodding in greeting, the Capital's Commander-in-Chief He Pei paces back and forth within the chamber, deeply creased wrinkles formed between his brows, seeing Qin Xun's arrival, a look of surprise and bewilderment emerges, the three step distance completed with two strides: "Lord Qin, you've also come."

Hand over hand as he bows, Qin Xun formally greets. Not waiting for his answer, He Pei hurriedly speaks again: "Could it be Lord Prime Minister is really severely ill?"

Qin Xun is stunned, not knowing how to respond. Prime Minister Lou has been taking sick leave since half a month ago, it has already been many days since he disengaged himself from the matters of the court, truly ill or fake ill? He originally thought the Prime Minister Estate inviting him over today is to receive medical treatment, but the servants actually led him to the discussion chamber, seeing the several senior officials within the chamber, his instincts tell him it is not due to the matter of Lord Prime Minister's illness.

Seeing Qin Xun's face, he too knows he is unable to give him an answer, He Pei sounds a sigh, heading back to his original spot with big strides, picking up the bowl of red tree peony design, he takes a drink of the hot soup, sitting his butt one seat down from Minister of Revenue. The other three senior officials upon hearing their exchange, their expressions flickers, face turning sullen, silently waiting within the chamber. Qin Xun slowly paces near, choosing to sit on the seat at the very end, within this discussion chamber, in terms of official ranking, he is most inferior, moreover, he is just an imperial physician with no real power.

Waiting for almost an entire hour, even Minister of Defence who is known for being deeply calm and composed, reveals a look of anxiety, the inside of the discussion chamber gets quieter and quieter as time passes by. He Pei makes a turn within the chamber, catching glimpse of a stack of memorial to the throne, placed at the table by the master seat, utterly unable to withstand the entire chamber of stuffiness, he heads forth, reaching out to flip through them, the other officials senses something wrong, having yet to stop him, He Pei who had

read the contents of the white paper suddenly exclaims in shock, brows jumping high, showing a state of panic.

This moment arouses the curiosity of the other senior officials, all stepping forward, carefully reading over the memorial on the table, all the memorial documents are actually recording affairs of everything that happened within the years of heaven's recording, what the events are, how the matter was dealt with, names of officials involved and so on, and according to all this, it all refers to the imperial court's mishandling of affairs, matters that have been neglected, amongst them, all imperial decrees that have been issued by the Emperor has been described particularly clearly, directly pointing out the errors behind the meaning of the Emperor's edicts, not at all shying away from mentioning the taboo (the taboo being the direct mentioning of the emperor). Stating the name of the sender and recipients, some are regional officials, some are courtiers within the Capital, all written to the smallest details.

Reading through the memorial, the several ministers' expressions appears much more solemn, unable to speak of their gloomy moods, all catching that thunderous shock hidden in one another's eyes, the frosty winter of the twelfth month, they all feel their backs oozing with cold sweat, hearts like highly suspended boulders, both uneasy and heavy.

"I have made everyone wait long." That clearly elegant and warm voice sounds from the doors, the group of officials hurriedly places down the memorial in hand, turning around. Lou Che steps into the discussion chamber, with thick fur of light purple, black silk belt embroidered in gold, green python skinned boots, the moment he opens the doors, a scene of plum blossom shines from behind him, a gloomy floral fragrant follows the wind in entering, petals and snow scattering all over, waves after waves of fragrance, waves after waves of frostiness.

Corners of his lips rising, laughter of clear elegance with graceful ease like reflected in green waves, vague as though distant. Walking into the chamber Lou Che waves his hand, signalling everyone to sit down: "What's wrong, senior officials all appear pale, are your bodies not feeling well?"

Hearing his voice of concerns, their hearts actually trembles, the five officials

within the chamber denies it at the same time, Minister of Revenue saying: "Thanking Prime Minister Lou's concern, it is probably due to the overly coldness of the twelfth month."

"En." Lou Che smiles as he nods, seeming to accept this reason, eyes glancing towards Qin Xun at the end, "Lord Qin has worked hard, I heard Lord Qin is about to retire very soon?"

With the mentioning of him, Qin Xun stands up, bowing all the way down towards Lou Che on the master seat: "This lower official feels my age is getting too old, afraid of wrongly diagnosing health conditions, harming others harming self, thus wants to return home earlier." Ever since the matter of Consort Ying's miscarriage, he deeply came to understand, the dangers of the inner palace courtyards, the thoughts of retiring, has been held in his heart for a long time.

"Lord Qin's void of greed for power and position, truly makes you admirable." Lou Che nods his head in praising, smile lines like water, yet those orbs are like green waves, there shows no joy, only showing indifference with neither joy nor anger, looking around at the senior ministers sat below, he slowly speaks, "This past half of the month, my body has been infected with minor ailments, unable to care for matters within the court, I hear his majesty has already been implementing his intentions to reform the central academy?"

Finally coming to main topic, the three ministers of labour, revenue, and defence raises their eyes at the same time, after sharing a few looks with one another, Minister of Defence takes the lead in speaking: "His majesty has the intentions to officially establish the central academy in the upcoming new year."

"His majesty is a little too hasty," Face showing very faint regrets, Lou Che takes hold of the memorials on the table, seeming to be finding some form of amusement out of extreme boredom as he flips through, "If that is so, what are everyone's opinions?"

The several officials upon hearing his words, all knew, the time has come to clearly declare their stands, hesitating for a moment, Minister of Labour stands up, bowing as he speaks of his own thoughts: "Prime Minister Lou holds brilliant visions, should the central academy be established, then the power of the six ministries shall all be reduced to empty titles, as though non-existent,

completely opposite from the previous generations, shared powers lead to absolute victory, centralised power leads to absolute failure, the central academy plans is absolutely not viable, also disadvantageous to the longevity of our Qi Ling."

Lou Che glances at him approvingly, indeed the older they get, the fierier they are, smiling but not answering, he waits for the others to respond.

"That's right, that's right, the plans for the central academy indeed cannot be implemented, if so, then would the six ministries not become empty titles?" Minister of Revenue hurriedly follows on, immediately speaking up after him.

"After the new year, hope Prime Minister Lou is able to return to court again, dissuade his majesty, the faction of courtiers within the court right now is muddle-headed to the extreme, in particularly that Lord Guan, young and reckless, I fear their ideas are influencing his majesty's decisions ah."

Seeing everyone declare their stances, Lou Che places down the memorial in satisfaction: "What everyone has said, is indeed of our Qi Ling's suffering, since everyone is so passionate towards the matter, then today we shall write up a petition to express our stance, wait till the year ends, we shall go request an audience with his majesty together, dissuading his imperial will." Raising his hand, pointing towards the inner chamber, the several senior ministers turns their heads to look, paper and ink materials fully prepared, a deep sigh filling their hearts, turns out the gathering at the Prime Minister Estate today was part of a plot all along.

These several people are originally of Lou Che's faction, clearly aware the emperor's plan for the central academy precisely targets the power of the Lou Clan, to this very moment, they are already riding a tiger, difficult to dismount, the round of battles they are to witness after the year end is something they cannot avoid like a rabbit, they too can only take on this unpleasant task, following Lou Che, one's glory is everyone's glory, one's loss is everyone's loss.

Seeing the several senior ministers entering the inner chamber, drafting out sections of the petition, the cold sharpness in Lou Che's eyes slightly settles down, turning to look at the only one who remains sitting, Qin Xun: "Lord Qin."

"This little official is here." Hastily answering, Qin Xun observes Lou Che, ill at

ease, wanting to catch a clear look of whatever is hidden under his appearance of elegance and grace, but other than that smile that does not reach the eyes, he is unable to see anything else.

"Back then it was Lord Qin who first discovered the mystery behind Lady Consort Ying's miscarriage, it is also Lord Qin who accompanied me in investigating the cause of the matter....."

He just knew that entering the Prime Minister Estate today is easy, but leaving will be difficult, Qin Xun's aged face bitterly wrinkles, silently listening to Lou Che's gentle voice like jade.

"Lady Consort Ying's miscarriage, Lady Consort Li's sudden suicide [by hanging], I believe Lord Qin must surely be well aware of the particulars in the matter down to the details right? Who the real mastermind behind the scenes was, Lord Qin should also be very aware of. Inviting Lord Qin over today, is but to request of you to clearly write down the matter, it too, can be considered Lord Qin's additional contribution to the imperial court before retiring."

The inside of the chamber originally cosy and warm, upon hearing these words, Qin Xun only feels his entire body infected by a shivering cold, Consort Li's death back then was indeed strange, he has once thought over it repeatedly, also able to work out who the possible mastermind is, but today Lou Che actually wanting him to write it down, one descend of the brush and ink shall then make a solid evidence, where is to find such guts, to point an accusing finger at the current.....

Shoulder sensing an additional warmth, he dumbly watches Lou Che approach, lightly patting his shoulder, even though watching Lou Che gather away the severe sternness in him, it still makes one sense the chill revealed within those deeply still orbs, he unconsciously bows his head to mask his eyes.

"Lord Qin carefully consider it, since there is still some time before retiring, Lord would not wish to leave behind regrets in officialdom right?" Lou Che averts his eyes away, the smile by his lips deepening, turning his head back around to everyone within the chamber saying, "The Prime Minister Estate has prepared food and wine today, treat it as though I am celebrating new year with everyone in advance."

Turning around after speaking, Lou Che's gentle and elegant steps paces towards the doors, opening them and leaving, just like when he had entered the chamber, the plum blossoms and snow outside the doors reflecting one another, the fragrance invading the wind, Qin Xun dumbly stands within the chamber, face stiff as though transforming into fossil, yet his lips responds: "Yes."

.....

"Attend to the lords inside well." Walking out of the discussion chamber, Lou Che indifferently orders the housekeeper, due to the strong and fierce winds, he half squints his eyes, leisurely looking over the subtle fragrance and very faint plum blossoms within the courtyard.

"Yes, Lord Prime Minister." Voice although hoarse and old, but is very steady, the old housekeeper stands straight like a wooden board.

"Immediately prepare the carriage, I need to pay a visit to the Prince Duan Estate."

Widening his eyes in surprise, the old housekeeper stares at Lou Che's back figure unblinkingly, pulling himself out of it after quite a while, hurriedly ordering the servants to prepare a simple carriage, up to the point when the horse carriage had far left the estate, he still remains a little absentminded.

In the evening hours, smoke curling into the air, Lou Che arrives at the side doors of the Prince Duan Estate, seeing the servants scramble to welcome him, he leisurely smiles, looks like the entire world thinks he and Prince Duan are as incompatible as fire and water, always seen as political opponents.

"What wind has blown Prime Minister Lou here?" Gradually approaching with dignified strides, Prince Duan's hearty voice travels over, "Is Prime Minister Lou not bedridden at home? Why the great mood today?"

"Your royal highness and I, can both be considered idlers, an idler meeting an idler, what other special reason is needed?" Not changing his gentle elegance, Lou Che deliberately ignores the satirical meaning behind Prince Duan's words, black orbs deepening, just like the night sky, containing a smile as he looks askance at Prince Duan.

Prince Duan stops laughing, looking over Lou Che, it is exactly this type of tolerance that is sleek like dripping jade, neither soft nor hard, that has vied against him within the imperial court for over seven years, and he himself has never gained the upper hand in the end, since the beginning to this very day, does he finally understands, this man has already put to play the gentle elegance of casual talents to the most extreme of potentials, masking his true nature, that is the sharp air of hidden blades that is embraced within his rolled up scholarly demeanour, not explicit, yet manages to harm people without a trace.

"Since Prime Minister Lou has such aesthetic mood, I shall naturally accompany you."

Once the two people is seated within the west wing guest hall, the servants had all already withdrawn, the three legged furnace of crane design diffuses faint white smoke, two flasks of wine placed on the red pine table, the rich wine fragrance filling the air.

Seeing Prince Duan unconsciously seeming a little stiff, Lou Che takes the wine flask first, pouring himself a full cup, conveniently filling Prince Duan's cup with the jade-like fluid, elbow resting on the table as he holds the cup, lightly taking a sip, the thickly concentrated taste so rich it sweetly slides down the throat, just like a little ball of warm fire.

"Great wine!"

Prince Duan knits his brows together, up to this point, he is still unable to see through Lou Che's intention for coming here, after pondering over it for a while, does he finally say: "Today......you have come to see Ying-er?"

If not for Prince Duan's face being extremely solemn, Lou Che would practically burst out laughing, sparkling eyes slightly narrowing, his enthusiasm calms as he answers: "That is one of the objectives."

".....then you have come due to the central academy matter?" Prince Duan raises the wine cup, taking a drink, sharp eyes sweeping across Lou Che, yet finds him unaffected by his words, that appearance, clearly looks a few points deeper than in the past, "His majesty is already preparing to unsheathe his sword towards you, instead of making any preparations, what have you come running over to my place for?"

"His majesty is a little too anxious," Lou Che one mouthful followed by another mouthful, carefully appreciating this wine like fine jade, "We as subjects, cannot always continue to watch his majesty take the wrong steps....."

Prince Duan does not give him any face at all as he coldly harrumphs before saying: "Put away your righteously loyal minister act, just directly speak of your reason for coming."

Lou Che lowly laughs, carrying a few points of pleasure: "Prince Duan is still Prince Duan, I have heard, the one responsible for the imperial guards within the Capital, Deputy Commander Zhao Min, shares good relations with your royal highness."

Nevermind "good", that is a secret chess piece he has meticulously arranged over many years, seeing the certainty in Lou Che's behaviour, seeming to be very clear of the subtleties within all this, the restlessly alarmed Prince Duan tightly furrows his brows.

"And how do you know of this?"

"That year's Changes of Feng Shan, your royal highness reacted with such swiftness, his majesty has clearly plotted everything beforehand, yet still managed to let you escape the Capital, should there not have been someone working from the inside, this could not have possibly worked out, I have investigated the imperial guards after the matter, and only then did I discover your royal highness' ingenuity."

Placing the cup onto the table, Prince Duan was unable to refrain from lightly sighing: "You wish to borrow this person for use?"

"I most definitely need to borrow this person," Long brows slightly twitching, Lou Che calmly says this, his tone absolutely resolute.

Prince Duan's expression darkens a little, eyes showing his restless mind as he stares at Lou Che whose faint smile is so leisurely. Making all the calculations in his mind for a long time, he is still unable to make a decision. Abruptly standing up, the wine cup shaking, a few drips of wine stains the sleeve, but he does not seem to notice. Pacing back and forth within the room in circles, he turns back to look at Lou Che, still that unaffected appearance, such casual calm as though the matter does not concern him, yet it just happens that all these troubles have all

been brought on by him.

"Since it is like this, then I shall lend you this person." Prince Duan grits his teeth as he consents, his brows not showing any loosening up, and instead knits together even deeper, "The favour I owe you.....this shall makes things even between us."

First a very light and inaudible sigh, which was then followed by the hooking up of the lips, Lou Che looks at Prince Duan with a seeming smile, frostiness sweeping past his eyes, disappearing in a flash: "If so, then many thanks to your highness."

He still managed to see through it! Meeting Lou Che's eyes like bottomless pits, Prince Duan suddenly gives rise to a burst of frustration. The hesitation he holds over selecting between the Emperor and Lou Che, despite lending him a man, he is still unwilling to stand in his camp......these calculations, in Lou Che's bright eyes like the moon, had actually been very clearly mapped out.

Prince Duan pours the wine into his mouth, lending the gesture of raising the sleeve, to cover Lou Che's snow blade like eyes, at the same time, covering his own loss of bearings, filled with shock and panic. The moment he places the wine cup down, Lou Che has a faint smile of elegance hanging on his face, that appearance from before seeming to be a mere illusion.

The two people does not converse as they drink a few cups of wine, Lou Che's appearance calm like the beginning, after a long while, he seems to have suddenly thought of something, asking: "How is Princess Consort Ying?"

"She is very well, just that morning sickness is a little severe." Prince Duan's expression eases with warmth.

Lou Che nods his head, the burden that had long been pressuring his heart seeming to have lifted a little: "The flasks are all empty......" After dropping those words, he throws his sleeves back as he stands.

"Today troubling you for a long time, I shall bid farewell now."

Prince Duan slightly raises his head, clearly a little suspicious. He originally thought there is still another round of disputes, being political opponents with Lou Che for many years, how could he not know his temperament, things or

people that can be used shall be used to the very end, definitely no principle of easily letting go.

"Prime Minister Lou seems to have changed a lot." Letting out a long sigh, not knowing whether it is of regrets or mixed feelings.

"Changed?" Lou Che strokes his forehead as he lowly laughs, eyes of ink jade reflecting the distorted figures of the cups and saucers, cold and clear like a secluded lake, eyes setting in the far distant, "There is no one who does not change in the world, just that you and I stand at the tip of the blade, thus changing a little more than others."

These words seem to be spoken from personal feelings, absolutely sincere, the very moment Prince Duan freezes, his instincts tells him, over the many years, it is the most truthful words that have spouted from his mouth.

Prince Duan's ears hears a word of farewell, and Lou Che had already turned his back, the flowing hair below his headdress rising in the wind, handsome looks radiant like jade appears calm like water, eyes dark like the night sky, deep as though bottomless.

"Prime Minister Lou." Even Prince Duan himself does not understand why he would call him to a stop, instincts tell him that Lou Che still has words to speak today.

With just one glance, he was able to see through Prince Duan's suspicions, Lou Che reveals a very faint smile at the corner of his lips, eyes looking through the window, seeing Prince Duan lantern hung inside, groups of servants shuttling back and forth, he leisurely says: "Your royal highness, have you never thought of becoming king?" This is his third reason for coming here today.

Eyes widening unblinkingly, Prince Duan shakes his head, a resonant voice joyfully laughs out loud: "Sitting on the dragon throne, then let you manipulate me? If I do not wish to be manipulated, then I will have to be like the current emperor?"

Lou Che also laughs, the moment he laughs aloud, the ice-like frostiness in his eyes dissipated: "Your royal highness is the one who has truly changed." Such words, how would the old Prince Duan have said such thing?

Gathering away his smile, he calmly leaves, just like when he had come, he withdraws from the side doors, without disturbing anyone, away from everyone's awareness, this night, Prime Minister Lou and Prince Duan who has always been political opponents, have reached a certain tacit understanding.

Political career, has no permanent friends, has no permanent enemies!

"Lord Prime Minister....." The old housekeeper who had received announcements from beyond the doors, hurriedly rushes all the way to the study room, that aged body showing unexpected vigour, steps steady and strong.

"What's the matter?" Able to make out something has happened from his tone, Lou Che only indifferently asks a word, without raising his head, absorbed in looking down at the desk.

"This was just sent over, his majesty's Yun Xiao banquet, inviting Lord Prime Minister to make a trip there."

The tip of the brush lightly trembles, one stroke drawing down, seeing the black ink of the white clear invitation, Lou Che's brows slightly creases, casually resting the brush onto the mountain shaped stand, looking at the old housekeeper short of breath, he indifferently speaks like floating cloud: "It is about time."

The emperor's patience has been used up, and his patience, is also exhausted. No good seat amongst seat, no good banquet amongst banquets, this Hong Men Banquet, has come at a considerably timely moment. (Hong Men Banquet refers to banquets set up as a trap for those invited)^[1]

Seeing Lou Che as calm as the clear wind and soft clouds, the old housekeeper eases down a lot, throughout this battle of the imperial court that lasted over half a year, his heart is always ill at ease, right now, seeing Lord Prime Minister with a heart steady as mountain, chest filled with certainty, he in return feels relieved, in front of Lord Prime Minister who is thoroughly prepared, what else is there that cannot be easily solved? The old housekeeper steadies his breathing, the corner of his eyes catching glimpse of Lord Prime Minister's eyes unable to leave the top of the desk, heart met with curiosity, he presses his head closer to

look over the xuan paper on the desk.

That painting......who is it? Blinking his eyes several times in absolute puzzlement, yet unable to recognise the person in the painting, the old housekeeper stares at the painting, finally seeing that the brows and eyes looks just like Gui Wan.....but, is this Madam?

Lou Che senses the old housekeeper's strange looks, and actually blushes a little, rolling up the painting. Not only is it the old housekeeper that is stupefied, even he himself does not understand, he is skilled in literary and painting, fishes, insects, landscape, not one is able to trouble him. Gui Wan has already left for almost two months, with not the slightest of news reaching him, like a thorn seeming to be stuck in his heart, he is just unable to rid of the distraction, today in the spur of the moment, wanted to paint a portrait. After raising the brush, did he realise there is simply nowhere to start.

Gui Wan's smile, Gui Wan's charm, Gui Wan's thousands of gestures, be it of frowning, be it of smiling, be it of anger, be it of singing, one brush one stroke, how can it possibly outline all this clearly?

"Ahem....." Softly coughing as he acts unwell, Lou Che asks, "Are there other matters?"

Old housekeeper hurriedly retrieves his line of sight, yet his face reveals a smile: "No more matters, no......Lord Prime Minister may carry on drawing Madam."

In heaven's recording of the fifth year, fifteenth of the first month, in name of celebrating Yun Xiao, a palace banquet is held, inviting hundreds of officials.

Once the reporting officer loudly shouts out Lou Che's name, all officials fell into a moment of sharp silence. The thick curtains raised, Lou Che calmly steps down from the horse carriage, containing a trace of a barely visible smile, looking over the scattered officials amongst the official road.

The officials that came up to him with friendly greetings are clearly of his own camp, the officials that remains standing on the spot as they respectfully bow, seeming to adopt a wait-and-see attitude, with no other expression, their

observing eyes containing meaning of ridicule, can only be the Emperor's supporting courtiers as of recent. The reactions of the hundreds officials one by one captured in his eyes, Lou Che appears calm, slowly stepping onto the official road.

The festive day of Yun Xiao, the lantern lights prosperous, night on the official road as bright as day. Sound of string and wind music drifting from within the inner palace, the music and singing playing without ceasing. The bright colour entering the eyes, the music pleasant to the ears, in this scene of seeming peace and prosperity, he instead senses insidiously murderous intent weighing heavy, traces of blood hidden under an armour of gold.

"Lord Prime Minister," A young imperial guard hurriedly runs past Lou Che's side as he quietly says, "Deputy Commander Zhao sent for this little one to pass on a message, there's an ambush laying inside the hall, may Lord Prime Minister be careful."

The one he has borrowed from Prince Duan, Zhao Min, is indeed a person of worthy use, Lou Che hangs a faint smile, lightly asking: "Are the arrangements of our people on this side all good?"

"May Lord Prime Minister rest assured, Deputy Commander already has everything prepared." Having said that, the little soldier did not attract any attention as he slowly walks away.

A wave of wind brushes against the face, the flickering lights like a tidal wave, under the flickering flames, Lou Che's face appears somewhat blurred, only that lasting faint smile on those lips remains clear.

The greeting officials that had come to his side, gradually increases, the official road soon coming to an end. At a spot not faraway, it is at the jade steps right before the grand hall where a ink blue figure slowly makes his way down, fair skin as white as a woman's, delicate facial features, that type of beauty that comes from maturing, fresh like the cold spring water, that handsome youth, in particularly standing out amongst the hundred officials, upon seeing Lou Che arriving, he smiles as he approaches, deeply bowing with clasped hands: "Teacher, student has been waiting for a long time."

Containing a sort of re-examining attitude as he looks at him, Lou Che smiles:

"Troubled Lord Guan."

"Teacher has been attending to ill heath at home, his majesty misses you a lot, today's banquet has also been set up for Teacher, may Teacher be sure to have fun." Whilst talking in such respectful manner, Guan Xiu Wen leads the way up the jade steps.

An ambush already set up in the hall, yet Guan Xiu Wen naturally chats and laughs away as he step by step brings him closer, this youth has long become unable to return to his original state. Lou Che calmly watches, his black pupils growing deeper, growing heavier: "The ones to have fun today should rightfully be his majesty and Lord Guan instead."

First raising his brows with suspicion, then faintly laughing it off, Guan Xiu Wen uses a type of gentle tone that contains satire and carries ridicule as he says: "Teacher truly is all-knowing. The difficulty of knowing yet facing it head on, such courage, a little junior like me can only hope to catch glimpse of the dust you leave behind."

"Why the need to catch glimpse of the dust, at this day and age, to have the methods it takes for today, Lord Guan is already the leader within our peers," Lou Che hooks up his thin lips, coldly looking at him, gracefully smiling, "It is only unfortunate, such means that spares no pain to such extent, what you lose in future may not necessarily be any less than the what you have gained."

Abruptly turning around, Guan Xiu Wen directly faces Lou Che, the smile on his face gathering away: "I have never gained before, where would the loss come from.....?" Suddenly realising his own loss of bearings, he immediately raises his smile again, his tone also restoring its usual gentleness.

"Teacher, the inner hall is already prepared, let us quickly enter."

The officials by the side, seeing these two teacher and student in name speaking and laughing as they walk, all felt greatly surprised, unable to grasp hold of the fake or real within their behaviour, only able to guess the situation from the sides, whilst secretly observing the two people's expressions at the same time. It is at this time when they have almost reached the top of the jade steps, an imperial soldier jumps out from the path ahead, hastily coming up to Lou Che and Guan Xiu Wen.

"Lord Prime Minister, the estate's housekeeper is reporting outside the palace, says there are desperate matters to relay."

Lou Che reveals a trace of surprise in his expression, hesitating for a moment, he orders for permission to be given. Guan Xiu Wen is obviously even more surprised than Lou Che, the imperial guards in this palace had already been replaced, all are of the Emperor's faction, looking at it now, Lou Che is even more inscrutable than he had expected, standing at the side, he quietly watches what is to happen.

"My Lord, my Lord....." The housekeeper takes on a speed that does not match his old age as he directly sprints over, unable to adjust his tone, "Yu.....Du Cheng has been sieged, Madam.....unable to get in contact with Madam....."

All officials who were close by could hear everything the housekeeper said, rounded eyes and knotted tongues, palpitating as they remain standing on the spot, "Du Cheng has been sieged" these five words thrown out in such ground breaking, heaven quaking manner, all were thrown into an uproar. Ever since the peace negotiations with the Nu Tribe, the borders have been at peace for a while, the meaning behind besieging Du Cheng, goes without saying.

"What?" First to cry out is Guan Xiu Wen, he widens his eyes, face turning pale, turning ashen, eyes deadly locked onto the housekeeper, charging forth a step, seeming to want to grab him by the collar, hand curled into a claw, yet in moment of sub consciousness he only grabs onto the empty thoughts of "what did you say, say it again."

"My Lord, Ling Long's party turned from south to north, planning to rush to Du Cheng to reunite with Madam, only upon arriving there did they find, Du Cheng has been deadly sieged, I heard above the city wall of Du Cheng, hundreds of Nu people have been tied up, the Nu Army has held back for three days, immediately about to invade the city." Reporting it all in one breath, the old housekeeper speaks quickly and desperately, but was able to let every official there to hear every word clearly.

In a moment of great shock, all officials simultaneously looks to Lou Che, only to be surprised to see this man of great wisdom to have his brows tightly knitted together, the bottom of his eyes darkly stained with panic, such shock and unease expressed in such obvious manner, unable to conceal his look of nervousness, even seeming to be unable to think at all.

Du Cheng besieged? Nu people tied up?

Having the old housekeeper's words simmer into his brain, repeatedly thinking over it, using commoners to counter the enemy, such means is not at all something Lin Rui En will do, he very soon comes to the conclusion, Lin Rui En has met with misfortune, Gui Wan's situation is of utmost danger.

Lou Che's breathing abruptly halts, mind suddenly turns blank, the glamorous colours of the palace before him suddenly loses all its brilliance. Looking at the prying eyes of the hundred officials, he could not help but feel irritated, waving his hand to have the crowd step away, he desperately needs fresh air, to relieve the pain deeply penetrating his heart and bones.

"Gui Wan.....Gui Wan is in Du Cheng," Everyone takes a few steps back, except for Guan Xiu Wen who takes a big step forward, bright glossy eyes from bottom up, completely filled with tension, "Now that the Nu Army has besieged Du Cheng, what is Gui Wan to do?"

His tone because of the loud cry, seems very sharp, the atmosphere before the grand hall falls into a strange silence. No one has ever seen this crystal clear youth acts so frantic, the worries and sorrow contained between those brows and eyes, just like a tense chord, at risk of snapping.

Lou Che stares ahead at a loss, that expression containing rage, containing unresigned will, Guan Xiu Wen's loud cry, seeming to have not entered his ears at all, the originally deeply contained sharpness in his eyes pierces through his disguise of gentle elegance, dark cold eyes icily brushing past Guan Xiu Wen: "Shut up!"

Being swept with such stern sharp eyes, the hundred officials dares not to speak a word. Lou Che abruptly turns around, long strides heading towards the inner hall, leaving Guan Xiu Wen and the other officials stunned on the spot.

Seeing Lou Che charge towards the inner hall, Guan Xiu Wen's heart beats like thunder, eyes turning dark and deep, gritting his teeth, he pounces forward. Grabbing onto Lou Che: "Aren't you going to save Gui Wan.....don't enter the hall."

Lou Che turns his wrist, throwing off Guan Xiu Wen, with a great amount of force, causing Guan Xiu Wen to stagger, practically about to fall: "Fool, without the mobilising of troops, how am I to save!"

Guan Xiu Wen freezes, calming down a little, seeing Lou Che's figure enter the hall, he remains motionlessly silent, many figures seeming to have passed by his side, numerous and scattered, wave after wave, after a long time, he lets out a long sigh, following the other officials in entering the hall.

The situation within the hall once again leaves him shocked, originally should be of string and wind instruments playing, a hall of dancing, music and lighting completely silent, the atmosphere extremely down. Practically all officials had their brows tightly knitted together, or scared or suspicious as they look at the one kneeling in the centre of the hall, Lou Che.

He kneels there.....upon seeing that moment, Guan Xiu Wen suddenly wants to say something, his lips lightly twitching, but no voice comes out.

Is this the one who stands high up, with dignified and vigorous spirits, Lou Che?

He who appears gentle, whose heart is in fact cold as ice, the powerful prime minister?

All of a sudden, he is unable to accept the reality before his eyes, the one who had always made him raise his head to look up to, the back view that he had always been wanting to surpass, is kneeling in the middle of the hall all alone, he should originally be loudly laughing out to his heart's content, yet in this very moment, he can only tightly press his lips together, steady his emotions as he watches the one in centre of the hall, Lou Che. Because in this very moment, he becomes aware that, this man, he perhaps can never possibly be able to surpass in his entire lifetime.

What kind of feeling is this, is it melancholy or regret.....?

"Your majesty, Du Cheng urgently requests help, General Lin has perhaps already met with misfortune, please immediately set a decree, to mobilise the northern army in order to provide support." Lou Che tries his best to maintain a gentle tone as he speaks, but is still unable to conceal those traces of tension.

The Emperor sits high above the hall, too far of a distance away, amongst the illusive lighting of the swaying lanterns, one is unable to catch a clear look of his expression, Guan Xiu Wen darkens his face, following up in kneeling in the hall, with two steps distance away from Lou Che: "Your majesty, Du Cheng has already been sieged, that is the gateway to our Celestial Empire, should the Nu Army march straight in, the consequences are unthinkable."

"That's right ah, that's right ah, the Nu Army is so ferocious, should they pass the checkpoint, Qi Ling would be in great danger!" Two strips of white hair on his temple like frost, the old minister of three generations, Yan Gang, also nods in agreement.

"Your majesty should set the decree whilst it's still early, Du Cheng can wait no longer....."

"This Nu Tribe truly is a pack of wolves with greedy hearts, clearly came to a truce with our court, yet actually going back on their words, our court should send out elite troops, teach them a good lesson."

"Give them a full frontal attack, they too are far too rampant, this barbaric tribe....."

The figure in yellow above the hall makes not a single move, a beautiful curve of his lips, he waves his hands bringing the talkative officials to a stop: "Why is the danger of Du Cheng only known now? What is the military division doing?"

Not waiting for the Minister of Defence to speak up in explanation, Lou Che disrupts: "Your majesty, the situation right now is critical, pursuing the matter of fault can be put off for now, please set the decree to mobilise troops."

"Prime Minister Lou seems to be even more desperate than I, news of the sieging of Du Cheng, was it Prime Minister Lou who got hold of it first?"

"Yes," Lou Che raises his head, directly looking into the heart of the hall, "My wife is also in Du Cheng, worried heart like burning flame. Should Du Cheng be broken through, the Nu Army will definitely pass through Yu Xia Guan, directly heading into the northern region, other than the heavily guarded city of Yu Xia, the northern region no longer has other fortresses and military power to resist the Nu Army."

All the officials' minds becomes snow clear upon hearing this fact, at the same time they reached this understanding, their hearts turns cold, also noting the meaning within Lou Che's words, Prime Minister Lou's madam is actually in the Du Cheng beyond thousands li of mountains.

"She is.....in Du Cheng?"

Zheng Liu sounds a very soft sigh, his words seeming to contain a trace of bitter laughter. Perhaps hearing the complex thoughts of concern of the one sat on the throne, the officials waits with bated breath, solemn silence falling upon the grand hall.

"Why is the military division still remaining still, accept the decree, gather military supplies, mobilise all troops of the northern states, and head forth to solve the sieging of Du Cheng."

"Yes," Minister of Defence stands from his seat, kneeling in centre of the hall with his head lowered, "The army cannot go without a commander, your majesty, don't know who should be sent out as the general this time?"

Upon hearing this, Lou Che stands up straight: "Your majesty, Bai Wei of Zhang Zhou is a militant talent, well versed in the art of war, acts with a steady head and uses great measures, may be worthy of the great responsibility."

The hundred officials all thought the Emperor would immediately reject Lou Che's suggestion, the surging undercurrent between these two people is already well known. But contrary to all expectations, Zheng Liu nods his head, without the slightest of hesitation, he sets the decree: "Bai Wei of Zhang Zhou, is bestowed the position of commander for the northern army."

Food supplies, armaments, soldiers and so on is quickly arranged, Lou Che kneels by the side, motionless, his body as though turning into stone, and Zheng Liu has never once told him to rise.

"Dear ministers, are there still other matters?" Zheng Liu's words contains faint fatigue.

"Your majesty, this minister pleads to lead supervisory troops for the northern army." Lou Che who had been kneeling on the ground suddenly speaks up.

"Prime Minister Lou....." Old minister Yan Gang looks back, originally wanting

to speak up in prevention, upon meeting the firm as mountains look in Lou Che's eyes, the words could only remain stuck in his throat. The grand hall once again falls into silence.

Zheng Liu appears to also be somewhat dumbfounded, the hand resting on the throne covered by his sleeve, tightly forming a fist, eyes as dark as ink locks onto Lou Che's every movement, quiet and bright as though wanting to see into his heart.

After a long while of eye meet eye deadlock, Lou Che's hand reaches into his sleeve, pulling something out, with only the length and width of a finger, on it are elegantly exquisite engravings, gold metal as clouds, circling a tiger, baring its fangs and waving its claws, the flowing colour and fragrance of the palace lanterns, shines onto Lou Che's hand, sparkling brilliance, such gorgeousness like the red rising sun.

"This minister admits being prime minister for many years, have gained no merits in the imperial court, may your majesty take back the prime minister post."

Watching Lou Che raise the gold seal above his head, Zheng Liu is once again speechless, staring into the centre of the hall without blinking, waiting to get a clear look of Lou Che's abnormally firm decision, his brows creases even deeper.

Waiting for so long, could it be that he has to give up, having gotten to this point?

All these years of avoiding the light to rise in the dark, waiting for this one day, the Yun Xiao banquet is the best opportunity to eradicate Lou Che, executioners already placed down both sides of the grand hall, with just one sound of an order, the Lou faction can be completely wipe out.

What is he still hesitating for, could it be because Lou Che voluntarily let go of power?

Kill? Or not to kill?

"Your majesty," By the yellow curtains, an eunuch leans close, Zheng Liu turns his head to the side, so it is the inner palace's Head Eunuch De Yu. He cautiously walks up, whispering something into Zheng Liu's ear.

Zheng Liu raises his brows, expression appearing greatly cold: "Really?" De Yu solemnly nods his head.

Once again turning to face the officials, Zheng Liu hooks up a smile of gentle warmth: "Minister Lou is a rarely seen young talent in our court, now that the borders are in need of urgent help, since Minister Lou has volunteered, I permit your request, head far to the borders, this prime minister post shall temporarily be withheld, wait till Minister Lou's triumphant return, and I shall reward you then."

"Thanking your majesty!" Passing the golden seal in hand to the eunuch by the side, Lou Che's thin lips reveals a smile, elegant to the extreme, looking up to the dragon throne, there emerges a trace of playfulness, disappearing in a flash.

Hand supporting his slightly numb body, Lou Che lowers his body to bow with clasped hands: "This subject shall be leaving first." Abruptly turning around, never to concern himself with the struggles of the imperial court again, he hurriedly strides out, the brilliance in the hall overflowing, outside the hall, dusk falls, a clear breeze brushes past, comforting without the weight of worries, the soul put at pleasant ease.

After Lou Che had left, the banquet falls into colourless dejection, the Emperor's mood dims, the hundred officials at great unease due to the war.

Music comes to an end, the people disperses, Zheng Liu lies on the throne slightly tired, the corner of his eyes catching glimpse of De Yu who stands by the side with his head lowered, he coldly asks: "What you said just now is true? There's an ambush set up at Yu Gan Hall."

"Yes, Prime Minister Lou being able to remain so calm, must be due to having an escape plan ready."

Furrowed brows, Zheng Liu senses a surge of restless emotions in his chest, after a long time, he lets out a long drawn out sigh: "Truly is regretful, how much I want to know, between he and I, who would stand victorious....."

[1] **Hong Men Banquet** or **hóng mén yàn huì /** 鸿门宴会 refers to banquets where those invited are to walk right into a trap set up for them. The terms has

come from a famous historical moment

In the late Qin Dynasty, Liu Bang and Xiang Yu led their respective army to fight against Qin's army. Though comparatively weak in military force, Liu Bang first occupied Xianyang (capital city of the Qin Dynasty). When Xiang Yu arrived in Xianyang, he felt furious and threatened to kill Liu Bang. To defuse the crisis, Liu Bang went to Hongmen to offer an apology. At the banquet, Xiang Zhuang, a general of Xiang Yu, pretended sword dancing in order to assassinate Liu Bang. But under the assistance of his subordinates such as Fan Kuai and Zhang Liang, Liu Bang rode out the crisis. (Credits to: http://www.cultural-china.com/chinaWH/html/en/38History1221.html)

For those interested, there is also a film based on this called White Vengeance 鸿门宴 starring Feng Shao Feng, Liu Yi Fei, Leon Lai and Anthony Wang. Though I have not watched it myself so I cannot say if it is a good film or not.

Full



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR (FINAL)

The Sin Of War

Day twenty three.

The late arriving spring infects the treetops, the streets and alleys of Du Cheng surrounded in light green, the spring breeze rises all around, bringing a ray of cosy warmth into the city walls.

The Nu Army surrounds Du Cheng in form of a fan, due to adopting the tactic of quickly defeat the enemy, an unexpected strategy with the element of surprise, they did not bring any heavy invasion weaponry nor food supplies, originally thinking they will very quickly capture Du Cheng, but reality proves the error in their perceptions and understanding. This city, once famous for being the capital of trade, in face of the invasion from cavalry troops totalling up to nearly a hundred and fifty thousand, actually managed to firmly hold their ground for a full twenty three days.

"We have already performed to the best of our duty." The sky yet to light up, Military Advisor with a face somewhat pale, enters the military discussion area,

saying this to the full house of Du Cheng generals.

The reaction from the generals all varied, Han Ze Ming only nods his head slightly, the slick and sly Defence Officer Jiang lets out a heavy sigh. The one known for his courage, Zhao Xin rounds his big eyes, an indignant demeanour, looking around at everyone's reactions, in the end, he does not say anything. When Military Advisor sweeps his eyes across everyone, not leaving a single person out, the moment he once again see Gui Wan, he finds that the her that is deep into thoughts, has curved her lips into a gracefully beautiful arc, faintly letting a smile bloom.

This is a very pure smile.

Waiting for everyone to leave, Military Advisor strokes his chin with a hand, warmly saying: "It has been tough on you these past days."

"The ones who had it tough, are the soldiers guarding the city."

Having never experienced the struggles of war, one would not know the brutality of it.

The soldiers' blood, the commoners' tears.

When they first started defending the city, she ordered the capture of four hundred Nu people, tying them up above the city tower, day and night hearing their weeping mixed with sorrowful singing, amongst them were old women with grey hair, also children who were too young to understand the way of life, just because of a war between two nations, they were treated as shields, standing in front of divisions of tigers and wolves. To this very day, those wave after wave of heart pricking singing seems to still be echoing in the ears.

"This is the sin of war, unable to be avoided!" Seeming to see the complications deep down in Gui Wan's heart, Military Advisor guides her out of those thoughts in an orderly and patient manner.

Raising her head like a cicada, looking at Military Advisor standing before the window, the new shoots a tranquil green, horizontal branches by the side, spring proudly filling the air, only that figure in front of the window, is bone thin, both sides of his head white like snow, those eyes once defined by her as old and cunning now appears greatly vast and deep. Defending the city for around

twenty days, he has actually spent each day like a year, an elderly state now complete.

Gui Wan vaguely remembers, the first time seeing him, the feather fan gently swaying, happily chatting about the interesting gossips within the Capital, and it is also this feather fan, that guided her to make decisions in defending the city, arranging armaments and food supplies.

On the third day Du Cheng was sieged, Ye Li had already intended not to care for the life and death of the Nu people, storming into Du Cheng, driving her into a cave, unable to advance nor retreat, not knowing whether to kill those four hundred Nu people, to serve as a warning to others. It was Military Advisor who warned her, killing the Nu people, will provoke anger in the Nu Army, it is better to let them go at the beginning of the siege.

Reality indeed went as Military Advisor expected, the Nu soldiers' morale indeed fell down a lot. The Nu soldiers' fighting spirit aroused by the first drum roll, depletes by the second, exhausted by the third. Only then, did Du Cheng struggled to hold on for over twenty days.

"Once daybreaks, the Nu Army shall be storming in."

Her mediated thoughts interrupted, Gui Wan looks out the window, brows slightly creased: "The Nu Army's insect attack pattern has lessened, is it in preparation of the invasion?"

"Nu King has lost his patience, will certainly exhaust all efforts in this one attack." Military Advisor turns to look out the window, the dazzling white lighting masking his body, like a sculpture.

Can Du Cheng still stand firm?

Heart already knowing the answer, yet still unable to refrain from wanting to ask this. Lightly stroking her forehead, Gui Wan, reveals a trace of a wry smile, the words at the tip of her tongue once again swallowed back down.

"Unable to withhold for a month, will you have regrets?" Military Advisor does not even turns his head, quietly asking this.

"Will." Stunned for a moment, Gui Wan truthfully answers.

Military Advisor slowly turns back around, that pale and exhausted face spreads a calm smile, smile lines like chrysanthemum, making Gui Wan get this feeling for the first time, that this wise old man is showing the loving care of one's elder.

"A knot in the heart, thus produces regret, only a life with regrets, will not be incomplete."

Rays of light entering through the windows gradually brightens, Gui Wan squints her eyes, leaving only a hint of white brilliance from the bottom of her eyes, within a trance, willow catkins scatters before her eyes, like dots of snow descending, drifting onto her cheek, a trace of coolness, just like returning to the day of parting in the Capital.

Like snowflakes, like plum blossoms, the lingering of clear yet distant, leisurely light fragrance.

That pair of hands she had once tightly clutched onto, ice cold inside out, yet she feels that it is the only warmth left in the world.

Her regrets, her concerns, slips away from her fingers in the boundless snow scene, forever frozen on that day.

A monstrous rumbling roar "honglong—" sounds from the skies.

A slight shock, Gui Wan abruptly opens her eyes, speechlessly looking towards the window where Military Advisor still stands straight, eyes fixedly staring into the distance, brushing away signs of fatigue from before, those eyes of ink sea blooms into a brilliant shine, a vigorous yet calm voice saying, "It's daybreak."

"It's almost daybreak!" Looking at the moment a burst of light appears amongst the dark grey sky, turning his head, Ke Zhan's voice is neither high nor low, perfectly loud enough for Ye Li who is in front of him to hear.

"Is everything ready?"

"Yes, Sire," Ke Zhan lightly bows his body, "Left, right wings of the whole army have assembled, once daybreaks, we can storm in."

Turning his eyes towards the southern area, Ye Li does not turn his body,

looking up at the boundless scene of darkness of the skies, seeming to still be able to faintly see the light of the stars, weakly about to completely diminish, and Du Cheng stands amongst this dull scene, the mottle grey on the city walls cannot bear to hold on, scattered and lonely.

It is this isolated city, that has become his stepping stone to gain the southern regions, over these past twenty plus days, again and again he has been stopped outside the city, in this vast road of wilderness, his cavalry troops are invincible, why is it in front this rundown city wall, that they are actually being held back from further advancing?

Burst of irritations rising in his heart, he forcefully grabs the long handled weapon from his waist side, an ice cold feeling spreads from the palm of his hand, penetrating the heart, his mind suddenly rendered calm like water, a hint of cold sharpness flashes past his eyes, body tensing.

The Nu Army are heroic eagles, they will definitely be able to spread their wings into the vast skies.

Can certainly not be stalled here, Du Cheng ah Du Cheng, this shield that leads into the southern region, the Nu will definitely breakthrough.

"It's daybreak—"

A sound of a loud cry suddenly reaches the ears, unable to tell whether it is of joy or wail.

Ye Li raises his head, in the distance, a glowing red sun slowly rises high, the red glow spreading, each trace like cotton, each wisp like dust, the colour of the sky breaks into two, half bright red, half ink black.

The time has come!

Abruptly turning around, Ye Li turns towards the camp, the army arranged into neat rows, the soldiers' eyes bright like stars, the golden blade of the long handled sword produces gleaming glory under the shining red light.

"For our great Nu's supreme honour, capture Du Cheng!" With one wave from the distant, Ye Li points towards the city in front, a face of solemn silence.

The entire army rendered pin drop silent, even the breathing of the soldiers

formed a low rumble.

"Capture the city!"

The drums of war sounds like the quaking of heavens.

Once the attack to storm the city hits, Gui Wan follows Military Advisor in arriving at the city tower, standing at the southern corner of the city, they watch over the battle situation from high up.

Brutal and tragic, these two words are simply insufficient to describe the situation before their eyes.

The Nu Army who has come prepared is even more ferocious than ever before. The ladders leaning on the city walls, troops rushing forth to knock down the walls, hands and feet crawling up. Their expressions grim, with no fear of death, this type of attitude of putting their lives on the line, gives an astounding support to their invading attacks.

Under the commands of Military Advisor, the soldiers above the city wall releases the long arrows together, densely with no open space, they shoot towards the soldiers trying to climb the walls, the long arrows pierces through the air wave after wave, countless screams sounds from the below the walls, the soldiers leading the climbs directly falls down, the soldiers following behind courageously continues to advance, with not even the time to look at their fallen comrade.

A soldier managed to escape the heavy danger, climbing to the top of the wall, a city defending soldier of Du Cheng pounces forward, long handled swords from both sides stabbing into one another, and together they fall down into the city.

Fresh blood dripping and spraying, limbs seen everywhere. In the laws of war, no one can possibly see the insignificance in any one person, all that can be seen is how powerful one side is, how weak one side is. And the weaker party is doomed to die. Perhaps every soldier present are all deeply aware of this one point, that is why their eyes turn red in bloodlust, the wielding of blade, can only lead to the brutality of striking towards the enemy.

Gui Wan stands above the damaged and crumbling city tower, clearly seeing the borderlines of the Qi Ling – Nu Tribe nations, such that is this deserted, this

vast. And right now, on this land filled with soldiers, these strong soldiers are divided into groups, they are wielding weapons, charging towards Du Cheng with the desire to kill.

The attacks coming successively without stop, having just stopped one wave, another wave will immediately come after, not knowing of exhaustion, with no fear.

The number of bows and arrows are no longer enough, Military Advisor immediately changes tactics, intending to proceed to have a direct collision with soldiers down at the city gates, the ones pushing back the Nu Army are also to take on a round of offensive attacks. This approach has never been used before in the past twenty plus days, and right now they have already reached a moment of life and death, Military Advisor appears to have decided to take the risk of desperately fighting back. In order to not bring any adverse impacts to the people within the city, the soldiers leaving the city is a kind of sacrifice, regardless of victory or defeat, they are not able to return to the city, fighting to the last soldier, last general standing.

Taking advantage of the little space left to spare from the Nu Army's advances, Military Advisor puts forward this suggestion, the city tower falls into silence like stagnant water, the three great generals solemnly stands above the tower, looking into the distance, their eyes filled with determination, having heard Military Advisor's words, they share looks amongst one another, their eyes communicating emotions unknown to others.

Zhao Xin strides out, one knee on the ground, resonantly saying: "This general pleads to take the front line."

"No!" A loud cry, is actually from the one who would always reprimand his impulsiveness, Han Ze Ming, "You are the only bloodline left of your family, nor are you married or have children, you cannot go."

His roar loud and clear, the soldiers on the city wall could all hear it, Gui Wan is stunned, Military Advisor also presses his lips together without a word.

"It is because old man I have no wife no descendants, which means old man I should be the one going out, one life making up the entire family. Should I be letting you go instead then? Your wife back home had only just given birth to a

fair and chubby son for you the past year, could it be you want to leave her to be widowed mother? Also old Jiang, your elderly mother is frail and sick, should you go, how is she to live? That's why I am saying, it is better for old man I to go, there is only me alone back home!" Zhao Xin's loud voice does not fall short from Han Ze Ming's, every word and sentence retorting back, and even revealing a prideful smile, as though he has thoroughly gained the upper hand.

Nose hit with a sour feeling, Gui Wan suppresses the impulse to let tears fall, squeezing out a smile: "This important duty shall be handed to General Zhao then."

Zhao Xin immediately jumps up, mouth forming a huge childlike smile, glancing towards Han, Jiang, his eyes seeming to be telling these two people, see, old man I has won right? Turning his head, he once again loudly shouts: "Great men, who is willing to accompany this old man to kill the Nu dogs?"

His loud roar richly dignified, spreading to every little corner of the tower, spreading into each and every soldier's ears. Every soldier raises their heads, looking up to the city tower. First one hand, then two, three, like the sparks of twinkling stars, setting the prairie ablaze, countless hands raised high, from the eyes of all the soldiers, there reveals the glow of courage. Amongst them are old soldiers in their forties^[1], are youngsters yet to reach their twenties, all scrambling to raise their hands first, hating to be last, in fear of the city falling.

"General, take me along, I am also a single life making up the entire family."

"I want to go, my sword skills are the best, has once killed nine Nu soldiers....."

Once these cries floods the city tower, overflowing inside, not only Gui Wan, but Military Advisor and the generals were all stunned. These soldiers in such unkempt conditions, due to illnesses, injuries, death, these soldiers when compared to the Nu Army's mighty strength, can barely be regarded as qualified soldiers. Many soldiers wounded, only able to roughly bandage their injuries, also some soldiers with wounded left hands, right hands holding a sword, right hands wounded, left hands grasping hold of a dagger-axe. All these faces covered in bruises, making all who sees them, not one that is not deeply touched.

In face of such a situation, Gui Wan could only sneakily turn her face away,

wiping away those tears at risk of falling, before turning back around, responding with a brilliantly bright smile: "Brave men have no fear, you are all heroes of Qi Ling!"

Heroes, in previous ruling periods, had always have countless people using their brushes to depict the meaning behind this word in later generations, they are perhaps those who blaze the road leading to a new era, or are perhaps warriors who rescued the people in times of danger of distress, or are perhaps officials leading institutional reformations.

But right now, heroes, is but one word used to describe these soldiers holding their hands up high. Every drop of blood they shed, eventually gathers to form a long stream, flowing outside the gates of Du Cheng, a continuous flow that will cover this vast land.

The drums of wars once again sounds, the Nu Army shall very soon be attacking the city again.

Zhao Xin leads ten thousand defending soldiers, leaving from the city gates, outside the gates of Du Cheng, they and the Nu Army directly face one another in head to head conflict for the first time.

To describe this battle, only the words "moving" and "tragic" can be used, and these words alone are originally not enough to make up for even a millionth of real war situations.

The Nu Army puts forth their full effort in launching their attack, Zhao Xin leads the troops into collision, the war horns deeply sonorous, cavalry units in full armour. Amongst the countless roaring of soldiers and horses, this war between two unequal forces begins.

The Nu Army's ferociousness is a rarity even within the history of war, they pounce forward like wolves like tigers, slashing as soon as they spot an enemy, the densely populated units like the flow of a black river, within a short moment of efforts, they had already stretched across the entire space before the city gates of Du Cheng. And the ten thousand soldiers lead by Zhao Xin, cannot be described as imposing, they are crazy, they are the heroic lions that have been released from their cages, their breathing heavy, wielding long handled swords in hand, upon seeing the black colour, all heads forth in tearing and killing, such

desire of jade and stone burns together, causing the Nu Army to be stunned on the spot.

The defending soldiers of Du Cheng charges into the Nu Army's ranks like a cutting blade, although there is a great difference in number, but they slice east, slice west, making the Nu Army suffer heavy losses every time, flowing blood forming rivers.

Once the comrades in front has died, they would trample on their corpses in advancing, even if their bodies are wounded by the blades, they still need to pounce forth, pulling the enemy down to hell with them. With such killing method of madness, the entire surrounding is thickly shrouded with the stench of blood, ears filled with tragic screams and furious roars. The surging momentum behind the Nu Army's attacks, time and time again, are shattered by the defending soldiers of Du Cheng, corpses bit by bit increasing, gradually piling up in front of the city gates of Du Cheng.

"Sire, this, what exactly is going on?" Ke Zhan who is situated in the rear ranks of the Nu Army rounds his eyes, looking ahead with an expression of being greatly taken aback, anxiously asking this.

It is said that the Qi Ling Army is known for being disciplined, and not for courage, seeing the Qi Ling soldiers today, how could they be this terrifying? No, perhaps they cannot be called soldiers, simply wild beasts.

Ye Li's face also darkens, greatly solemn as he watches the mountain of corpses and sea of blood before his eyes, in the end, he sternly answers: "This is a strong nation!"

Riding his horse up front, charging into the middle of the ranks, Ye Li arranges the army ranks all over again, adding up the advantage of their greater number, they take on the tactic of encircling, countering void with solidity, countering solidity with void, consuming the strength of Du Cheng's defending soldiers, bit by bit exterminating them.

This strategy is obviously very effective, once the ten thousand Du Cheng soldiers fought with their all for two hours, their numbers were continuously dwindling. They still remain courageous, charging forth to kill the enemy without hesitance, not at all caring for how many people they have left. Because all their

hearts and minds believes, behind them, are their homes, inside are their elderly mothers, tender wives, lively children. They need only to take one step back, and their homes will no longer be homes, their country will no long be a country.

Can only advance, cannot retreat, fighting to the very last man!

Once Ye Li sees the swallow jaw and tiger bearded^[2] general charging over, eyes red with bloodlust as he drives into the Nu Army's ranks, body hit with four or five arrows, but still continues to fearlessly charge forth, his target seeming to be Ye Li himself, as though his heart had been harshly crashed into, the general wants to open his mouth to shout out, but does not know what to say. The guards by Ye Li's side all shoots out their arrows, in a blink of an eye, that Du Cheng's general becomes a wasp nest, until the moment his body falls straight to the ground, that pair of blood red eyes remaining fiercely rounded.

"Find out his name, bury him!" Ye Li concisely commands. Ke Zhan hurriedly orders people to step forth to carry the general's corpse away, towards Ye Li's command, not one Nu soldier held any doubts, the Nu Tribe looks up to heroes.

A hero, even when dead, should still have the right to have a name.

• • •

"That idiot!" Han Ze Ming who stands above the city wall, upon seeing the moment Zhao Xin rides into the Nu Army ranks alone, lets out a sound of lament like that of weeping.

A military flag waving in her hands, Gui Wan turns her head to the side, clearly seeing a crystal liquid fall from the corner of Han Ze Ming's eyes, her heart bursting into feelings of sorrow. Turning her head back to observe the battle, ten thousand soldiers, gave their all and died on the battlefield. Below the city walls, heavy piles of corpses has accumulated, a mass amount of bloodstain spreading out, as though a tree peony of brilliant red is blooming open from the earth.

"Du Cheng cannot hold on!" Military Advisor calmly says this.

The city defending soldiers within the walls only adds up to no more than ten thousands, and the Nu Army although suffering heavy losses from the surprise attack just now, their number is still eight times the amount of Du Cheng's. The fall of Du Cheng is perhaps only a matter of time.

"Not good!" Defence Officer Jiang hoarsely cries out, "Nu King has gone mad, he is not taking a rest to reorganise the ranks, intending to launch an attack just like that."

Upon hearing this, every single person looks to the front. The Nu Army which originally should be taking a rest, neatly lines back up in their ranks. Perhaps being stimulated by the sudden assault just now, Nu King clearly does not intend on giving Du Cheng any more time to catch their breaths.

Even Military Advisor found it strange, stood stunned above the city tower. No one would have expected, that having experience such huge losses, Nu Army would actually not take a break for reorganisation, within a moment, they too did not know how to react.

The between of her brows deeply creased, Gui Wan steps out, raising the military flag in hand high up, lightly waving it, the soldiers below the walls upon seeing the signal, immediately arranges themselves into units, distributing themselves within the city walls, each performing their duties, ready for battle.

Han Ze Ming was startled by her move, quickly glancing in front, he tightly grits his teeth, loudly roaring out: "Great men, guard the city!"

A burst of response sounds from below the walls, every shout quaking the heavens.

Military Advisor comes up behind Gui Wan, quietly guiding her on what commands to make. Up until the inner city is fully prepared to face the enemy, he doubtfully asks: "To this very moment, you still believe Du Cheng can be saved?"

"Don't know," Lifting her head, looking up to the skies, amongst the blissfully floating clouds, she is unable to see through anything, "People, should always have hope, if not, how are you to face the numerous changes in a moment?"

Pondering in silence as he listens to Gui Wan's words, Military Advisor's expression shows inner complications, his heart seeming to have hundreds of feelings gathered inside, after a long while, he calmly speaks up, "You've raised wrong, should primarily be focused on defending the northern walls, the foundation there is weak."

At this moment, the Nu Army is already like black water flowing to bottom of the city gates, this is clearly an effort to launch an attack before breaking into the city, the large scale troops as though not a single person making their voice heard, only the sound of between the clashing of swords, battling for an entire day, the Nu soldiers with bodies covered in blood, their blades long lost their clean brightness, and is instead coated in layers and layers of dark red, they remain calm and collected, slowly approaching the city gates of Du Cheng, trampling all over the piles of corpses on the ground, amongst these bodies, the greater half of them are of those who were once their comrades.

Time seems to have stopped, seeming to become increasingly lengthy, all eyes casted below the city walls, Du Cheng's defending soldiers unconsciously grips tightly onto the long handled swords in hand, gritting their teeth, eyes set dead on ahead.

In this moment, she is feeling greatly at unease, just that, she stands above the tall walls, unable to show the slightest trace of withdrawal, she must be firmer than anyone else, stabilising the army's morale, this is what she should be doing. But to personally face such ferocious military units like wolves like tigers, lunging forward, she trembles......

The shadows of death falling upon them.

"Listen, what is this sound?" A soldier stood above the city wall loudly shouts out. This would originally not attract anyone's attention, but that rumbling sound like thunder becomes more and more clear, up until no one was able to possibly ignore it.

"This is the sound of advancing military units," Military Advisor's face turns ashen, staring ahead unable to calm himself, what he is worried about, is the Nu Army sent for reinforcements. And the other generals were also worried about this, thus not uttering a single sound, the slightest trace of hope that surged up just now, becomes like a flickering candle flame amongst the sound of these horse hooves.

A mass amount of human figures emerges from the horizon, gradually moving, gradually approaching, like a line separating heaven and earth, a clear blue colour slowly emerges, just like a puff of white cloud diffusing from the land, also

like clear waves flowing down from the heavens. This moment comes so suddenly, that the city walls were rendered silent, before bursting into heaven quaking cheers.

"Colour of sky blue, that is the Qi Ling Army ah!"

Every city defending soldiers is cheering, overjoyed like mad, practically forgetting the battle before their eyes. Every sound of loud cries swallows up the waves of war drums, echoing into the skies of Du Cheng in such heaven quaking, ground breaking manner.

Hundreds and hundreds of feelings, of emotions, bit by bit surging up from the bottom of her heart, Gui Wan turns her head, seeing Military Advisor excitedly grabbing onto the city walls, that expression of joy, of surprise.

Face sensing hot trails trickling down her cheeks, Gui Wan chokes back her tears, even she herself is unable to tell whether it is weeping or great joy, the moment she raises her head, bits and bits of cold touches lands onto her face, she blankly looks towards the skies, the snow like goose feathers, like flying catkins covering the entire sky, gently descending, the heavens and earth rendered a lustrous white.

"It's snowing?"

"It's spring snow! The start of the new year, representing spring is coming!" Not knowing who explained this by her ear side.

With tears blurring her visions, she continues to look around, the snowflakes like lustrous jade drifts onto the earth, looking into the distance, she actually sees that amongst the sky blue flags, there is one that seems to be waving the character "Lou" (楼)……

Is this a dream? Or is it an illusion? Wiping the tears from her eyes, she finally sees that colour like clear water, that flag proudly waving in the air.

"He has come! It is he who has come!"

"Sire....." Unable to control his panic, Ke Zhan raises the rein to turn the horse around, facing Ye Li's eyes like a frosted blade, "Qi Ling's reinforcements have

arrived, let us retreat whilst we have time."

"Storm in!" Not giving the slightest of care towards Ke Zhan's suggestion, Ye Li raises his weapon up high, pointing it forward. Above the mottled city walls, the defending soldiers who had originally already grown exhausted, because of seeing hope, suddenly shows great vigour. As for the Nu Army, their originally ferocious stance, because of seeing Du Cheng's reinforcements, sees a significant drop in morale, state of anxiety and confusion emerging. Seeing the current situation, Ye Li suddenly senses a burst of rage, for over twenty days, he was met with the discouragement of unsuccessful capturing of the city, and all of sudden, everything pours into his heart, stuck in his chest, he looks at the Nu soldiers exposing their fatigue, looks at the blood flowing across the land outside Du Cheng, looks at Ke Zhan's pair of concerned eyes, everything that enters his vision, ignites a fire within his heart, the more it burns, the brighter it grows......

Cannot resign!

His hundred thousand of heroic soldiers and armoured cavalry, had actually been stopped outside those city walls.

"Sire, look at the military flag, that is Bai Wei of Zhang Zhou, he is an old general, highly experienced in the art of war.....let us retreat first, return to the Nu Capital to reassemble our troops, then come back again." Ke Zhan's eyes turns red, blocking Ye Li from the front. Their young and wise Nu King, with deeply creased brows right now, sparkling eagle eyes glowing with a sharp chill, actually even more colder than that of the northern wind scraping past the face.

Ye Li glares at Ke Zhan who holds unwavering loyalty, listening to his remonstration, before him a fog-like blur separates them, looking past Ke Zhan to see that upfront actually holds such a clear scene, those defending soldiers of Du Cheng carrying determination within their sorry state, their figures seeming to merge into one with the city walls of Du Cheng, firmly standing in front.

Legs clamped onto the horse's body, he charges forward, Ke Zhan was unable to stop him even if he tries, only able to follow behind him. Ye Li comes all the way up to the front of the ranks. The Nu Army upon seeing their leading commander, sees another rise in morale. The Nu soldiers surrounding Du Cheng at the front, automatically makes a path, allowing Ye Li to pass through.

Arriving below the city walls without being stopped, Ye Li takes everything into eyes clearly. The defending soldiers of Du Cheng are already set on guarding the city with their lives, such stance of being unafraid of death, he having fought so many years in the battlefields, seems to have encountered this for the first time. Just as Ke Zhan had stated, this very moment there is still the chance to retreat, whilst the Qi Ling Army is still quite some way behind, to retreat right now, will mean that they will not have to face the enemy in a disadvantageous state. As long as they go back to reorganise the Nu Army, a comeback is not an impossible task. The hand holding the weapon senses an unfamiliar cold touch, he raises his head, face suddenly hit with an ice cold sensation, visions suddenly flooded with the sight of white.

"It's snowing!"

The sky that was originally sinking into darkness is now filled with the descending snow, drifting like butterflies, the silent battlefield turns a puzzling white, the white falls onto the Nu soldiers' ink black armours, exceptionally blinding. Ye Li silently watches, his face expressionless. And every Nu soldier had their eyes focused on their king, waiting for their next command. And at a spot not far away behind them, the horse hooves of the Qi Ling reinforcement army resonates powerfully as they approach.

Ke Zhan sees Ye Li slowly raise his left hand, knowing this is the signal for retreat, the huge stone in his chest is lifted, unable to help but to reveal a bitter smile. Just as he wanted to turn back to relay the command, Ye Li actually makes a sudden freeze in between his movement. Not one of the closest group of Nu soldiers was not shocked. And their king looks up at the southern city tower, stunned, unable to snap out of it for a very long time.

The Nu soldiers simultaneously raises their heads, looking towards that corner of the city tower. Many years later, there was still a soldier present at the time, who reminisced this, saying: that one scene, is deeply engraved in their memories, difficult to erase, at the corner of the city, stands a woman, stood amongst the drifting snow, at the time, no one would have thought that the one raising the military flags to mobilise the army would actually be such a woman. All the soldiers were very angry, until the moment they got a clear view of that woman, their anger suddenly disappears. She has a head full of long black hair,

so black it resembles the night skies of the grasslands, her hair raises in the wind, amongst the snow, he seems to have gotten a completely clear look of those strands of hair, like the most heavenly of the Celestial Empire's silk. At that moment, the sky was already darkening, the snow occasionally reflecting white rays of light, wrapping around that woman's body, within that moment, one could only think of the statue within the Lunar God Temple.

Similarly as stunned as those Nu soldiers were, Ke Zhan very easily diverts his line of vision away to see Ye Li, very intently watching the woman above the city tower. That kind of expression, seeming to have already forgotten the battle, forgotten the Qi Ling reinforcements behind them, within those eyes, there even seems to be the exhibiting of deep affection, revealed like a butterfly breaking out the cocoon, outrage, love, and even obsession, one by one flowing out from Ye Li's orbs. Ke Zhan was extremely shocked to see this, in his memories, he has never seen the Nu King with such an expression before.

Snow falling onto the face, dots of biting chill, looking through the vast snow scene, Ye Li's one glance catches onto her.

Just like four years ago, she was silently stood before his eyes like this. He still remembers he had been captured into the Capital, escaping into the Capital's alley, that night was so quiet, the grey bricks of the alley glowing in yellow brilliance, he sees her make a sudden turn.

Within a similar night, she sends him out the city, under helplessness, drinking his blood, that warm touch on his wrist, as though infiltrating into his bones, upon recalling this, this type of throbbing subsequently rushes into his heart.

This woman, like a shadow chasing the figure, pestering his heart for four years, yet he still wants to look at her, even if it is from outside Du Cheng, she contains her hate in facing......

Just watching her like this, he has practically forgotten everything.....

He is suddenly very curious, in the same moment he obsessively watches her, why is she turning a blind eye on the heavy force of Nu Army below the city, and is instead looking into the distance, her line of sight unwaveringly set there. He abruptly turns his head, following her in looking into the distance.

The sky blue military flag already extremely close, and in the leading

commander ranks, there waves a flag of the "Lou" character, Ye Li's brows lifts high, sharp coldness directly shooting over, clearly seeing, that delicately handsome man, with the gentle warmth of jade, clothing flapping in the wind, a fleeting image. Abruptly thinking of one man, although he has never personally met him, but has heard countless people speak of him, the powerful prime minister of Qi Ling. Seeing him also have his line of sight unwaveringly set above the city tower, that type of expression, such ease of mind, such joyfulness, all mercilessly stabs into Ye Li's heart.

He turns his head to the side, watching these two people exchange looks from across a might force of thousands of soldiers and horses, seeming to have already forgotten earthly pleasures.

The highly raised hand commanding the army to retreat is slowly put down, Ye Li steadily looks towards the clearly elegant figure above the city tower, the many passing days of stifling depression, the fire deeply hidden in his heart as though it has been ignited, burning within his chest. He remembers, before their departure, the sheepskin map hung in the command tent, on it is marked the crisscrossing of hills and streams, that is his dream since young, that is the deeply dormant ambitions of the Nu Tribe.

He leads the elite warriors of the Nu Tribe, wanting to leap across this dangerous barrier, opening up a new world, to actually, right here, because of one woman, one pair of delicate jade-like hands, be stopped outside Du Cheng. This woman, has once made him open his eyes up to the unlimited possibilities Qi Ling holds, it is also this woman, who is currently separated from him by a wall, so close yet so far. And she, from start to finish, has not once lowered her head to give him one look.

She gave him a peerlessly beautiful desire, and she, had also, within these twenty three days, destroyed the dream he had since young.

The flame in his heart shining more brightly the more it burns, giving rise to the killing intent inside, a treacherous spark flashes past his eyes, Ye Li with a turn of his hand, snatches a strong bow from a nearby soldier, positioning the arrow onto it, the arrow pointing towards the city tower.

Even he himself does not understand, what he is waiting for, perhaps.....

Perhaps, waiting for her to look at him.....

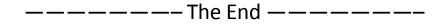
"Sire....." Catching onto Ye Li's abrupt move, Ke Zhan exclaims, but in the very moment he turns his head, he sees Ye Li in a state of utter desolation, those slightly curled lashes, soiled with snow dust, the instant he blinks, turns into tears, sliding down his sharply sculpted face. The words he wanted to say is halted in this very moment, stuck in his throat.

The bow slowly pulled back, until it forms a full moon, Ye Li stares towards the only person able to attract his eyes, under the sky filled with rising and falling snowflakes, she suddenly reveals a smile directed towards the distance, within his treasured memories, he has never once seen such smile of heartfelt joy from her before, as though overflowing with happiness, clear and elegant like chrysanthemums, like the brilliance of the moonlight.

Heart like a chord, stretched so much it gives rise to aching pain, the knuckles of his hand holding the bow glowing white, he grits his teeth, staring dead on ahead, such unwillingness to resign, filled with great despair......

The feather on the arrow slightly trembles, he tensely pulls back the string, to the strongest point before releasing, the arrow flies out like a shooting star.

A silver light piercing the air.



- [1] When people reach their **forties**, this age is also referred to as **bù huò zhī nián /** 不惑之年 which literally translates to the **age of full confidence**, or **the age in which one no longer holds doubts**, simply put it is the age we supposedly become truly wise individuals.
- [2] **Swallow jaw and tiger beard** or **yàn hàn hǔ xū /** 燕颔虎须 is the description that refers to a mighty appearance, wide jaw and thick beard, the phrase first seen(?) as the description of Zhang Fei's appearance in Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

Well, with the novel brought to an end, I just want to take this oppurtunity to say a big big THANK YOU to all of you for reading, despite there being some ups

and downs, and you also had to put up with my weird mood swings, which I am terribly sorry for, but overall I do hope you all enjoyed reading COB, thank you for sticking through to the end, even when our dearest general left us (T_T) and Gui Wan...I know, I know, that open ending is just... (-_-") but don't worry, there will be more updates to clear that up!

So with COB finished, currently, I honestly have no set plan for whatever my next translation project will be, so you are very welcome to pop over to the translation project page to leave a suggestion, and perhaps drop a like to support suggestions that others have made. But before I choose my next project, I guess I will just be taking a little break from translating hahaha

Full



EPILOGUE

Flying Into The Homes Of The Common People

In heaven's recording of the fifth year, spring, Zhang Zhou's old general Bai Wei led troops of one hundred and seventy thousands up north, saving Du Cheng from its siege, Nu King Ye Li was forced into retreat. The frontiers halted battles for more than two months, Qi Ling and Nu Tribe reaches settlement. Yet Ye Li actually mobilised troops to head down south during the peace settlement, Bai Wei thus suffering a great defeat, with the loss of eighty thousand soldiers outside Du Cheng, falling back to guard Tong Shu, Nu King is of valiant bearings,

unwilling to give up and follows in pursuit, successively capturing three cities, Bai Wei's hair grew white overnight, committing suicide in Xi Zhou.

Zheng Liu was outraged by this. The value of the Shu Clan is put forth in this moment, under desperate measures, Zheng Liu elects Shu Yu Cai as commander, leading troops in Xi Zhou, preventing Nu King Ye Li from advancing south. Shu Yu Cai had only just reached his twenties, skilled in all areas of astronomy and geography, and is particularly well versed in the art of war. Taking to brutal means, on the battlefield there is nothing he will hold back on, Nu King could also do nothing about this, the two sides continues their confrontation in Xi Zhou for five years, the war adding up to almost a hundred battles, the people residing by the frontier lines miserably suffers. In heaven's recording of the tenth year, autumn, Nu King Ye Li's body feeling unwell, thus retreats. In the winter of the same year, the two nations makes peace negotiations — with the exclusion of Xi Zhou — Tong Shu, Tu Lun Fan, Du Cheng, these three lands are ceded to the Nu Tribe, the two nations comes to a truce.

The Battle of the Jade Governor continued for five years, Emperor Zheng Liu of Qi Ling had his worries taking a toll on his health, body hit with a vicious disease, his condition sometimes good sometimes bad, the imperial physician at loss what to do, reaching the time of the year everything returns to spring, the season of flourishing flowers, the truce between the two nations restored peace to the hearts of the people, yet Zheng Liu entered the state of being incurably ill, disregarding all medications.

"Your highness, your highness......" The palace maid hurriedly runs into the hall, the Empress who was sat behind the curtains with sleepy eyes, was startled by this cry, her eyes abruptly opens, unable to conceal how taken aback she is, "Is his majesty......"

"Reporting to your highness, his majesty urgently summons you, the imperial physician.....the imperial physician says may your highness quickly go, any longer and it may be too late!"

The Empress deeply furrows her brows, combing back the hair on her temples, in that very moment, a flash of sorrow is revealed in her expression, but disappears without a trace, standing up, she orders, "Quickly summon the Imperial Lin Army's Commander into the palace to await orders!" The personal

palace maid quickly runs out, the Empress gently lets out a sigh, leading a group of palace maids and guards, she hurries towards Yu Gan Hall.

The outside of Yu Gan Hall filled with towering ancient trees, the spring sun shines between the branches, a luxuriant green like jade, just that as one approaches, a thick herbal smell rushes up the nose, gloom follows the herbal smell in dispersing into the spring shades. The Empress steps into the hall, attentively looking over, this hall uses the reflections of glass to gather lighting, the lighting like strings of beads, the form it takes like a woman with hair done up in a highly pulled back bun, a great aesthetic style.

The countless times she has entered and exited this hall, but this one time, it is just like the first time she had stepped inside, heart at great unease, as though sensing an inner voice screaming within her chest, her heart beats faster, wanting to jump out of her chest. Inside the hall, so open and empty, deeply secluded, with not the slightest of sound, knowing that the Emperor has only summoned for her alone, the servants withdrawing to the left and right, she slowly paces into the hall.

"Is that Empress?" Behind the heavy curtains, a deep voice gently calls out, his tone very low, like an echo bouncing off the walls.

"Your majesty, it is I!"

The one behind the curtains seems to have let out a sigh, but also seems to not have let out a sigh, the Empress lowers her eyes, the bottom of her feet smooth and flat like a mirror, she lightly holds up her skirt as she heads forward, leaving behind a very light shadow.

"Help me up!" Zheng Liu says. The Empress hurries forward, rolls up the curtains, half sitting on the side of the bed, reaching out to help Zheng Liu up, placing an embroidered pillow behind him, beyond the curtains there contains a type of smoked ambergris scent, surging up the nose, making her feel a little dizzy, seeing the situation beyond the curtains, her heart is hit with shock, a richly sour feeling hits nose, and she was practically about to break down in tears, mouth unable to refrain from softly calling out: "Your majesty....."

Zheng Liu smiles, ever since he had fallen gravely ill, it seems to be the first time he had revealed a smile: "I just had a dream, dreamt of seeing Mother

Empress, she says I had been lying here for too long, should I lie here any longer, this country of the Zheng Clan's will end up in the hands of others....."

"Your majesty....." The Empress lowly murmurs, the tears unknowingly falling down, "Your majesty's dragon body is priority, the big matters within court naturally has, naturally has......" Anxiety rising in her heart, all of a sudden, unable to think of anyone else in court who is worthy of mentioning.

Zheng Liu closes his eyes, calmly saying: "I am ill, but not old, what the imperial court is looking like right now, how could I not know? Empress, I have made an imperial decree several days ago, placed on the table, you go help me get it."

The Empress nods, wiping away her tears, she stands up, coming up to the table, a piece of paper placed on top of the dark red wood, a few lines of words hastily written over it, the imperial decree laid out flatly, her eyes sweeps across, seeing the two words "eldest son", heartbeats like thunder, hands refusing to listen to the mind as it trembles, touching upon the imperial decree, she dares not to look at it anymore, hurriedly rolling it up. Within this lifetime of hers, she has received countless imperial decrees, but only the one in her hands, seems to weigh heaviest, as heavy as thousands of jin.

Zheng Liu does not even glance at the paper in the Empress' hands, only saying: "You take a look." The Empress' hands starts trembling, unable to suppress the feelings of worries, panic, and also that type of indefinable sense of unpredictable overcast, slowly unrolling the paper, those few lines, she has stared at for a very long time, her brows creasing together, as she says: "Your majesty wants to mobilise the southern army to eradicate Prince Duan? But, but doing this, is it not, forcing him into revolting? Also the Shu Clan, they gained merit for the Battle of the Jade Governor, yet your majesty......your majesty wants....."

"Empress," Zheng Liu cuts off the Empress' speech, face looking more pale white than that of paper, his right hand slightly raises, "I know, Yu Yan He of Jin Yang is your assistant in power, he can be a great supporter, in future, can become one of your strong pillars in court. The old minister of three generations, Yan Gang, is most loyal to our Zheng Clan, in future when Xuan-er succeeds the throne, old ministers like him still needs to be relied upon. You remember, master is weak, subjects are deceiving, number one – must guard against those

who hold great power, number two – must guard against being a weak master with overpowering subjects, number three – must guard against those of royal bloodline.....Prince Duan is currently assembling forces gradually, has long lost the heart to be subject, taking advantage of him having not an ounce of suspicion right now, destroy him in one strike, should this opportunity be missed, once I leave, you mother and son alone, how are you to stand against him.....?" He has spoken so much in one breath, seeming to have already exhausted himself, his brows tightly knitting together.

The Empress was just about to speak, but was stopped by the look in his eyes, after taking a little break, Zheng Liu continues: "The Shu Clan are a hidden danger, but can temporarily be put aside for now, should you go against both the Shu Clan and Prince Duan at the same time, it will instead make them join hands, then this country of our Zheng Clan can no longer be protected. Two powerholders plotting against the lesser, the meaning behind this, you should be well aware of......Empress, Xuan-er is too young, I electing him as future emperor, who knows how many conniving wolves will be hiding in the shadows, Empress, in future you must not act impulsively, can only carefully plan out your path, first kill Prince Duan, then destroy the Shu Clan!"

The Empress upon seeing him forcefully keep his eyes open, an extraordinary splendour in his eyes overflowing, immediately panics, as she persuades: "What your majesty has said, I know, I know......your majesty, you take care of your dragon body, these big matters will not be too late to take care of once your majesty gets better....."

Yet Zheng Liu seems to not have heard her, mind at ease as though in deep sleep, abruptly, he waves both his hands, right hand grabbing upwards, but is unable to get hold of anything, his peaceful face reveals a trace of deep sorrow, mind seeming to have already turned hazy, his lips muttering: "Empress...... Empress......"

"I am here." Reaching out her hands, taking old of Zheng Liu's struggling right hand, the palm of his hand cold like ice.

"You tell me, where is she, just where is she?"

She? Which she?

The Empress parts her lips, but senses a bitter feeling in her mouth, with not a single word coming out, instead, a string of tears comes rolling down, marking a blotch of dark yellow on her chest.

Zheng Liu widens his eyes, directly looking into the veiled curtains, hastened tone revealing his disorderly state: "Did that arrow hit her? Did it hit her.....who is to tell me, if it hit her?"

The Empress stiffly leaves him to grab onto her hand, Zheng Liu's grip tightens the longer he holds on, a state of utter panic, seeming to be grabbing onto something with his life, and all seems to be completely in vain.

Hand sensing pain, heart, seems to be even more in pain, as though a roar is trying to break out from her chest, and the moment she parts her lips, that roar only comes out in the form of gentle words: "Your majesty......already passed, that has already passed, it has already been five years ah....."

Zheng Liu was stunned, the evident panic between his brows lightening up, yet the sorrow thickens: "Five years, it's been five years? Why do I feel it was but only a moment ago, I see her every night in my dreams, she is smiling, smiling so sweetly, I have never seen her smile like that before......why has she never smiled at me? Ye Li's arrow shot her, I almost went crazy upon hearing the news, hating to be unable to kill Ye Li immediately on the spot, I have sent for so many people to look into it, but have not gotten any news of her......exactly is she dead or alive? What about Lou Che, he too had disappeared, where has he gone? I am waiting for his return, return to fight a decisive battle against me, why is he too not returning.....she and he, exactly where have they gone? You all tell me...... where have they gone?"

His last sentence shouted out aloud, the loose hair as though dyed in frost scatters by his cheek, eyes looking lax. The Empress kneels beside the bed, half sprawled on Zheng Liu's body, suppressing his struggle, eyes and nose running, burying her head into Zheng Liu's chest, clearly hearing that "putong putong" heartbeat, so close to her, in the end, she could no longer tell whose heartbeat it is.

"Your majesty.....your majesty.....please stop thinking about it, it's already been so long, already been so long ah....." The Empress wails, "Your majesty,

Prime Minister Lou is not returning, that one arrow, ended everything, Prime Minister Lou is most unwilling to give up his power, but for Gui Wan, he is willing to do anything......your majesty, please stop thinking about it, they are not returning, not returning!"

The hall suddenly turns silent, other than the Empress' wailing, nothing more can be heard, the struggles and cries just now, fades away as though it was all but an illusion. The Empress raises her head, tears blurring both eyes, Zheng Liu silently lies there, the Empress' hand senses something wet and warm, upon a closer look, Zheng Liu's face, actually has wet trails.

"Lou Che willing to give up all for her, I know, if not he would not have kneeled before me back then, is this the reason? I can present all treasures before her, yet for her, Lou Che is able to give up all these treasures......is this the difference? Ha-ha-ha-ha......" He crazily laughs out loud, his breathing unstable, "I was wrong, I missed the opportunity......back then I investigated her identity, she too had once drawn the Emperor Swallow Stick, I should have kept her behind......I was wrong......"

"Your majesty," The Empress withdraws the hand suppressing Zheng Liu, "Back then I had tested her, she said she is simply not a phoenix that can enter the imperial family, it is her who gave up all these, not your majesty's fault ah....."

It is uncertain whether Zheng Liu is able to clearly listen to these words, those eyes that were once deeply filled with brilliance gathers away its light, leaving a deep deep black, one look sees a bottomless pit: "She doesn't want.....what I give, she doesn't want!"

He softly says, only speaking for himself to hear. The Empress hears this, sensing nameless sorrow. After a long time, Zheng Liu had already restored his quiet, the corner of his lips hangs a faint smile, just the same as usual.

"Empress, you tell Xuan-er, I am not a good father, I will be leaving behind the two of you, to continue to struggle for this imperial throne. Just that I have a few words to leave for Xuan-er, tell him, the imperial throne, is honey on the tip of the blade, should you grow greedy for that sweet taste, you will be entangling yourself in a bloody mess, and those around you will avoid, give way, such taste,

is far too lonely....."

Heart as though a hole had been drilled through, empty, painfully worried, the Empress forces herself to nod her head with a smile: "Yes, I will naturally convey this."

Zheng Liu says no more, the Empress takes hold of the blanket beside the bed, gently covering him with it. The lighting in the hall overflowing, filling up the space behind the curtains, faces pale and cold, chin pointy, an entire face giving rise to a layer of light green. She looks at his face, heart beating like a drum, within the heavy silence, she hurriedly turns away, covering her face with her sleeve, wiping away the tears.

The entire hall in complete silence, quiet to the extreme, Zheng Liu tossed and turn just now, very tired, seeming to be in deep sleep. Within this quiet hall, only his breathing can be heard, every inhale and exhale, deep and shallow. She holds back her breath to listen, yet her eyes wanders around the inner hall, the lighting outside the curtains frequently forming strings, passing through the reflection of the glass, it carries slight colour, sometimes yellow, or red, casting upon the mirror-like tiled ground, the lighting appears alive, quietly spilling out from the air.

How long has it been since she has experience such silence before? So long even she herself has forgotten. These past few years, did she have any moment that is like today's?

Since the Battle of the Jade Governor started, first it was Ba Wei who got defeated, committing suicide in Xi Zhou, following on, his majesty had been physically and mentally exhausted, severely ill, on one hand, the imperial court goes through reformations, eliminating those of the Lou faction, on the other hand, Prince Duan is unable to remain still......for how many years has she survived outside this hall?

Pile after pile of happenings, which of these did not leave people worried, stuck in a dilemma?

She lowers her head, noticing her own hand, smooth and tender, fair like jade, still looking like a young girl in her twenties, not at all seeing the signs of aging. But deep inside, she is well aware, she is already old, even if her appearance

remains the same as the past, the heart, has already grown old.

Within these five years, she has been in this hall, watching Zheng Liu grow weaker and weaker, moment after moment of aging, only feeling that these days are so long, with no limits and boundaries......just like this, pushing the heart to mature.

Upon thinking this, she cannot help but to sense a sour feeling in her heart, silently letting out a soft side, turning around, she catches glimpse of Zheng Liu's bright yellow sleeve hanging outside the blanket, reaching out, she gently tucks it back into the silk covers. Within a trance, the hand under the covers abruptly grabs onto her wrist, heart sounding "putong", giving her a little scare.

"Gui Wan?" Zheng Liu turns around, deeply calling out, voice a little unclear, seems like sleep talking.

Just now, she was still in a bit of daze, her thinking unclear, upon hearing this calling, a burst of chills hits her heart, her entire person wide awake, face turning red then white, the silk cover before her such a brilliant yellow, so bright to the point of blinding. She withdraws her hand, the force in this movement extremely great.

Zheng Liu is startled awake, opening his eyes: "En?"

The Empress was terrified, only now does she realised what she had done, hurriedly saying: "I was discourteous."

Zheng Liu once again calls out: "Is Empress?" The Empress sounds a reply.

"You were watching over all along?" Zheng Liu's spirits seems to be slightly better, "You too must be tired, so take a rest, the decree I gave you, take good care of it."

The Empress is slightly stunned, only saying: "Your majesty, how about I continue to accompany you here?"

Zheng Liu did not expect her to say this, raising his head to get a good look, stupefied. Chest gradually feeling stuffy, breathing uneven, he was even having difficulty with breathing, not knowing where he got the strength, he waves his hand in irritation: "Withdraw, withdraw......I don't need taking care of."

Ever since Zheng Liu had fallen ill, his temper had always been bad, the Empress could only helplessly withdraw away from the curtains, kneeling on the ground: "I shall take my leave." No one speaks from behind the curtains, she slowly stands, holding the imperial decree placed at the side, with slight movements from her fingers, it is put away into her sleeves. Settling down her feelings, she turns and leaves. With every step the colourful lighting from the glass circles around the floor, as she walks out of the large empty hall.

"He Chu....."

Hearing this sound of soft calling, her body is stunned, steps coming to a stop. Frantically looking back, staring towards the curtains unbelievingly, the wind gently blows, the pond-like ground ripples, sparkling gold.

Just like when she had just entered the palace to become Princess Consort, he had once stood beyond the curtains, half holding up the curtain, a smile hanging between his brows, softly smiling, every word calling out to her: "He Chu, He Chu....."

But this sound of calling, she has waited for, for ten years already.

"Your majesty," She speaks up, voice trembling badly, words not matching the tune.

"I know, you and they are keeping it from me, not letting me know....." Beyond the hazy curtains, his voice is faint like a flat line.

The Empress slightly trembles, her lips parts, a mix of colour flashing past her eyes, getting a splitting headache, yet deep inside she could only think: He knows, he knows everything, he knows everything.....

"I do not blame, you are doing it for my own good, but I just want to know, she.....exactly is she....." A sudden shortness of breath disrupts his words, the Empress silently listens, half her body turning numb, kneeling down on the ice cold floor, only her delicate figure stands amongst this huge hall, such desolation difficult to describe.

"For-forget it.....you withdraw, I don't want to know," The one behind the curtains heavily breaths, such breathing already using up all the energy in him, his throat hoarse, spending a long time trying to get the words out, he is finally

able to say with great difficulty:

"These years, it has been difficult for you."

How could the Empress possibly hold back anymore, the tears streaming down, she cover her face, pushing her body up, hastily stumbling out in leaving the hall.

The sunlight outside the hall shining bright, bringing the brilliance of spring to an end, warmth harmoniously fills the air. The servants within the courtyard are all being sent away, she looks over this empty yard, wailing aloud.

An entire lifetime of tears, seeming to be used in this one moment.

This one cry took up an entire hour, the moment she snaps out of it, the skies were already dark, it is already evening. The flowing tears from her eyes coming to an end, and only now does her heart feel lighter. Thinking over the situation in Yu Gan Hall today, heart like an understanding mirror, able to make out the meaning. Hand reaching into her sleeves, tightly gripping onto the light paper, she slowly walks out of the courtyard to this hall.

Stepping out the main doors, a group of eunuchs and palace maids had long been waiting, seeing someone appear, a mass of dark heads kneels down. The Empress extremely exhausted, waves her hand as she says: "Return."

Every person gasps, a few palace maids steps forward, upon getting a clear look of the Empress' state, they were all shocked, not daring to say much, serving the Empress with great caution. The remaining people performs their respective duties, guarding outside Yu Gan Hall. The Empress' body grew weak and numb, leaving the palace maids to support her, as they take a few steps out, once again turning her head back, the red lacquer and gold doors were deeply sombre, no longer able to restore its previous brilliance, as though purple smoke had been casted on it, dark and cold, the night skies like paint, giving rise to a chill in her heart, heart rolling like waves, but unable to explain why she is feeling like this.

Back to Feng Ye, the lanterns already lit up, scattering across the courtyard like bright little pearls. The palace maids withdraws to the sides, the Empress alone sits within the palace hall, watching the waving candlelights, casting a colour of silver brilliance onto the walls, whilst she herself silently enters deep thoughts.

It is in this moment a palace maid jogs in, the Empress greatly irritated, coldly says: "Did I not tell you all to withdraw?" The palace maid immediately kneels down, taking on this unpleasant task of reporting: "Head Eunuch De has been requesting an audience in the front hall for a while."

The Empress turns her eyes, looking at the shadow the lanterns had casted in the front hall, saying: "Allow him in." The palace maid sounds a reply and withdraws, not long after, De Yu in a body of scarlet red robes slowly paces in, without raising his eyes, he respectfully bows down.

"What matters does De gong-gong have?" These past few years, the only person whose words can get through to Zheng Liu is him, because of this, the Empress has always maintained politeness towards him.

"Your highness, the Imperial Lin Army's commander upon receiving your highness' decree, has been waiting outside the palace for half a day." De Yu says.

The Empress knits her brows together, only now does she recall the decree set in case of any emergencies, saying: "Allow him to withdraw." De Yu upon hearing the orders, does not move, steadily remains standing before the hall. The Empress seeing him with not the slightest of response, could not help but be angered, cold eyes shooting towards him: "My orders, did you not hear it?"

"This little one believes that the right course of action is for your highness to have the Imperial Lin Army's general to remain ready on standby outside the palace." De Yu speaks with a neutral tone, neither high nor low, clean and clear like a jaded bird, not hurried nor slow as he speaks, putting one at ease.

The Empress' wrath, was originally about to erupt, but once De Yu had finished speaking, upon thinking more carefully, it indeed makes sense, suppressing the anger within, the Empress asks: "What's the reason?"

De Yu raises his head, skin fair and bright, brows and eyes show righteousness, as he lowly says: "Prince Duan is currently in Qu Zhou, only two days journey from the Capital, only if your highness takes advantage of this timing to grasp hold of the Capital's military power now, would Prince Duan not be able to act recklessly....."

The Empress was greatly shocked, blurting out: "His majesty, his majesty is still here.....you....."

De Yu's pitch black pupils meets with the Empress' panic-stricken eyes, sternly saying: "Could it be the imperial physician did not tell your highness, his majesty is already unable to get up these days, only today did his spirits liven up, can only be afraid......" He swallows back the remaining words, attentively looking over the Empress, seeing her seem to be concerned, and not showing any trace of anger, he immediately continues to speak, "Your highness may not have taken precaution for the rainy days ahead, but the best way to go is to take preventive measures. By taking control of all imperial guards within the Capital, those with ambitious heart, even worse, those with sinister intentions, will be brought to a deadlock within the Capital, your hands will also be gaining an additional bargaining chip in face of struggles, more importantly, gaining precious timing to seek help from across the land."

The Empress does not speak, eyeing De Yu from head to toe, cannot help but to grow suspicious, he was never one who served her, nor has he ever gained anything from her, why is everything he is doing, helping her? Every word spoke, is to plan things out for her......

"These five years, his majesty greatly ill, bad tempered, when I have matters to report, it is often gong-gong who gave way to me, also pitching in good words to his majesty very often, today gong-gong has even hurried here to plan ahead for me, gong-gong's deeds, truly makes me puzzled."

De Yu faintly smiles, the Empress' eyes fixed onto him, her head slightly lowered, the pearls by her ears swaying, giving rise to silver lighting under the lanterns, that side profile, is exactly like that one person in his memory, who also lowers her head in smiling like this, and also carries a hint of faint silver lighting. De Yu slightly falls into a trance, due to having recalled certain matters and happenings, he has slightly frozen in sorrow, his mouth unknowingly answering: "Entrusted by another."

The Empress' brows jumps up: "Who?"

The hall filled with deeply still air, echoing her sound of "who", De Yu stands still with not a word, the Empress' eyes like a bright blade circling around him. Thinking without stop deep inside, the breeze during spring night as though carrying a sharp chill, whistling into the hall, causing the lanterns to sway in a disorderly manner, disturbing the lighting within. Thousands and thousands of

thoughts and clues flashing by the mind, the Empress' heart thrown into chaos, only feeling that she is missing something, suddenly, a lightning flash passes.

"It's her!" She lowly cries out.

This ball of mess has been unravelled, gaze deadly set on the bowing De Yu, her heart feeling as though a knife has ripped an opening in it, many many things, one by one falling out onto the ground, her heart is clear, at the same time feels lighter, lighter than a feather.

"So it is you, so it is you, I alone, how could I possibly keep away the news from his majesty, so it was you who aided me from the shadows," The Empress bitterly laughs, "No wonder his majesty does not know, that's right, in this palace, only you are able....."

De Yu sees her eyes look far away, suddenly solemn, a pair of autumn-like eyes reflecting countless number of things, the things weighing her down is too much, making one feel pressured, not daring to watch intently, he calls out: "Your highness."

The Empress does not answer, hand on her head as she softly sighs, motionless for a long time, after a long moment, does she remember something, suddenly raising her head, saying: "Back then did his majesty investigate her? Did she really draw out that stick?" This voice directly bursting out from her chest, desperately quick, leaving her to pant.

"Yes. Because Prime Minister Lou looked into it first, his majesty also sent for people to look into the matter, according to the investigator's reports, that day at the temple, all worshippers gathered, the young monks made a little mistake, knocking over two kau chim pots, the sticks mixed together, there were two people who drew out the stick."

"Two people? Who was the other person?"

"Yao Ying."

The Empress grips onto her own sleeve, her mind tightening, with the mentioning of this name, her heart cannot help but to sense pain, as though it is a thorn that had been stuck in her heart from a long time ago, even with the passing of time, one touch will still bring her pain. Her eyes looking into the

distance, passing through the many courtyards, seeming to have flew faraway, above that brightly yellow large hall, to the already gravely ill emperor.

She cannot help thinking, within that emperor's lifetime, his fake love, given to Yao Ying, his true love, given to Gui Wan, only she, real or fake, was given nothing.

Glamorous years flowing by like water, her lifetime, only comes down to this imperial palace in the night, and also the thin imperial decree in her sleeve.

"Your highness," De Yu seeing her face turn ashen, hurriedly speaks, "Your highness must be prepared for the future, Crown Prince still needs your protection."

The Empress is startled awake by the two words of "Crown Prince", sitting up straight, she lightly grits her teeth, a chilly voice asking: "Then what was the results of the investigations? Exactly what makes the Emperor Swallow Stick so miraculous?"

De Yu lets a shallow smile float to the corner of his lips, shaking his head: "Your highness' heart knows very well, so why continue to ask? What the investigator had reported back then, only one matter, I had kept away, not reporting it to his majesty." From his waist he takes out an embroidered pouch, greyish pink satin, embroidered with cloud-like patterns, above it are golden tassels hanging, gently swaying in the wind, it appears to be well cherished, always kept by his side. From it, he takes out a snow clear silk fabric, folded into a little square. He takes two steps forward, passing it to the Empress: "This is the note that came with news of the Emperor Swallow."

The hand passing it over is only a small distance away, she presses her lips together, face turning a little green, not daring to take it, that is a type of fear, fearing that this type of fate that makes her envious, can be shown to her so easily.

In this moment of her hesitation, a sharp ringing suddenly sounds from outside, the sounds are rapid and instable, instantly spreading throughout the entire imperial palace, piercing through the calm night. Inside the palace, there are people shouting, crying, unable to make out their voices. The Empress' body trembles, her mouth turns dry, something seems to have lightly drift past her

ears, yet she hears absolutely nothing. De Yu lightly sighs, taking back the note in hand. His gesture instable, the thin silk fabric drifts to the ground from his hand, yet he does not pick it up, freezing on the spot.

A palace maid breathlessly runs into the hall, face drenched in tears, crying as she speaks: "His ma-.....his majesty......passed away!"

The Empress opens her mouth, but says nothing. Only inhaling the cold air, the chill travelling into her body, filling her heart. She clutches onto her chest, afraid that any moment now, her heart will stop beating, touching her chest, there, it is also ice cold, body shivering.

She feels as though her alive and beating heart had just gotten a piece cut out of it, such numbing pain, too late to cry out loud, the tears in her eyes already cried dry, right now, only sensing astringent pain in her eyes.

She in his heart, be it real or fake, does not take up any space, gaining only a title. But now that he has gone, does she know, how much of her heart he had occupied. He is no more, her very last support is also no more, a scene of chaos before her eyes, vast emptiness behind her, all is empty.

"Your highness, your highness......" The palace maid shouts out aghast, seeing the Empress stare ahead, such state so chilling, so horrifying. De Yu steps forward, patting the Empress' back, deep voice advising: "Your highness must take care, you still have Crown Prince." The Empress catches her breath, unable to emit a sound, she grabs onto De Yu's hand, long nails drawing red marks on the back of his hand.

"Gong-gong assist me!"

De Yu reads the words from her lips, solemnly nodding.

Tears slowly falls from the corner of her eyes, she thought that she no longer had anymore tears to cry out, turns out this thing called tears, also has no end, inexhaustible. The lanterns hanging from eaves sways to the wind, the lighting dimmed, reflected on everyone's faces, also brings to light the dejection, carrying a mournful colour. After a long time, regaining her senses, she exerts some strength with her hands, pushing herself up. De Yu supports her from the side.

She has no time to be wailing, nor is there any time to be sorrowful, only in this moment, not knowing how many pairs of eyes in the Capital are simply watching on, how many sparkling hearts are beating. Should she spend this time weeping, her husband's imperial throne, her son's fate.....what will become of it?

She cannot stall here.

"Come, prepare the sedan!" She speaks up, voice abnormally hoarse, suppressed, yet also extremely firm.

De Yu supports her arm, step by step heading down the hall.

That plain white note gets stepped on by her as she passes, yet she does not notice this in the slightest, eyes set straight ahead, each step more steady than the other, each step more certain than the other, each step more graceful than the other.

The hall doors of Feng Ye are slowly closed behind her, sounding gezhi gezhi.

The lanterns within the hall all put out, quiet with not the slightest sound, the wind rustling by like screeching cries, the entire sky black, heavily falling upon the hall, only leaving behind that little touch of a pale white note, as thin as onion skin.

Only two lines written on it:

The swallows of the former noble families, has now flew into the homes of the common people. [1]

[1] Lines from the poem Wu Yi Alley by 刘禹锡 Liú Yǔ Xī

I know you guys are waiting for the ending snippet after that open ending, but honestly the final lines of this epilogue pretty much says it all haha so let us just take a little time to appreciate the empress' character here.

So gentle and elegant but deep inside she holds conflicting feelings towards Gui Wan, the gratitude towards this younger sister who has done so much for her yet there is also the mix of hate and jealousy since her husband has only ever truly loved one woman.

Yao Ying received his fake love, Gui Wan received his sincere love, only she

alone receives nothing.

Many characters are all pitiful in their own ways, but I personally believe the Empress takes the cake in this one. Her entire life residing within the lonely palace walls, yet she still stands above them all, in that she chooses to stand strong for the sake of her husband's will and for her son.

Full

This little snippet is taken out from another novel by the author which has actually been dropped, so it will be a little confusing to read in that we are not familiar with the characters of this novel, nor do we know what is going on, all we know is that this takes place around one hundred years later with GW's story being passed down from generations to generations, like a folk tale.



ENDING SNIPPET

(Snippet From Mèi Luó/魅羅)

Three large canopy stands under the parasol tree, the two closest to the tree was already fully seated with people, the three people chooses the most far sided table, having just seated themselves, they hear a burst of applaud from the

audience. That little boy raises his head, Jiang Hou Er has just spoken up to the climax, making a sudden turn up on the tree branch, winning the crowd's cheer.

".....Du Cheng has only twenty thousand military force, only after the city defence had held up to the twenty third day, did the Nu King discover Madam Lou above the city walls, think about it ah, originally a great foundation destroyed by one woman just like that, how could he not be angry, thus raising the bow and arrow in hand, shooting it out towards Madam Lou who was on the city tower. All of you take a little guess, did that shot hit her or not?" Jiang Hou Er casually sits on the tree branch, whilst nodding his head, asking those enjoying their tea in the canopy stands below.

"That Madam Lou is a great heroine, and is even more a beauty that can overthrow cities, it's not like that Nu King is blind, how could he bear to shoot her, from what I see ah, that arrow must have shot wide." A big burly man in brown commoner's clothing had just been taking a drink of tea, and hears this question, rushing to speak up first. Everyone upon hearing this, feels that that burly man's words, although a little inappropriate, but the meaning is very reasonable, just as they had thought so themselves, everyone unanimously agrees with a public outcry of laughter.

That little boy upon hearing up to here, withdraws his line of sight, mumbling: "Ignorance....." Once the gentleman in green clothing hears this, he faintly says: "Could it be you know what happens after this?"

"That is natural, I am but of Zong Lu Tang......" Once the words are spoken, he is suddenly alerted, glaring at the other person, "You're trying to ease me into speaking again." So this clever little boy is Zong Lu Tang's Elder Qing Yi's disciple, Xiao Ke.

The one dressed as a gentleman in green is Shu Yi, she looks into the shades of the parasol tree, without even turning her head, she casts aside a few words: "I'd say you don't even know either, this matter already happened a hundred years ago, if it is your teacher telling me, I would believe it more."

Xiao Ke's face darkens, muffled, scratching his head, with a straightforward temperament, he cannot resist provocation the most, mood always revealed in his face, Shu Yi notices this little point, deliberately choosing to ignore it, soon

after, Xiao Ke could no longer hold back, lowly speaking: "This story, every one of us Zong Lu Tang disciples knows of it." Shu Yi turns her head without much of a care: "Oh?" Shu Yi quietly sits to the side, regarding the two people's conversation, she seems to not mind at all, that clear and handsome face as cold as snow.

Xiao Ke looks at Shu Yi, then looks at Shu Xuan. A type of anger caused by neglect surges up his heart: "Of course I know. Nu King under a moment of rage, shot out the arrow, how is there the reasoning of him missing? At the time, although with all the generals, the military advisor at the side, not one of them was not taking notice of the movements from the reinforcements, no one was aware of the unusualness below the city, even if they did notice, just who is able to act faster than an arrow, that one arrow, indeed struck down Madam Lou."

Shu Yi shallowly smiles: "That being said, then that Madam died above the city tower?"

"No," The worker comes with two pots of herbal tea, Xiao Ke hurriedly pours himself a full cup, before finally speaking again, "Perhaps the Nu King unconsciously left a few points of mercy, Madam Lou was indeed struck by an arrow, but did not die, only suffered a serious injury. At the time, Lord Prime Minister Lou was amongst the reinforcements, witnessing this scene, he was driven mad with a grieving heart, waiting for the Nu King to withdraw his troops, Lord Prime Minister Lou sent for people to look all over for famed physicians and famed herbs in order to cure Madam, later when the armies were engaging in war, Lord Prime Minister feared his past political enemies will come forward to inflict harm, thus disappeared from the government and public along with Madam, during the later years after that, he operated a herbal business amongst the commoners, conveniently managing news within his business network."

Shu Yi takes a sip of herbal tea, she looks at Xiao Ke who had just finished his storytelling, saying: "This should be the origin of 'Zong Lu Tang" right? Originally founded to gather intelligence and herbs, after a hundred years of growth, it became today's standalone sect. I heard Zong Lu Tong was founded by a woman named Du San Niang, a hundred years ago, by that Madam Lou's side, was there not one called San Niang?" Within her eyes, something settles, vaguely deep and heavy, as she slowly says, "That's why, every disciple of Zong Lu Tang knows of

this story."			

Full



SPECIAL CHAPTER

Wrong Fate

Countless trees covering the skies, temples gates highly opened.

Buddhist mantras flutters and flutters as it drifts into the ears, within it is also the noisy confusion of human voices, and pouring in is a particular kind of tune like still waters running deep.

"Rui En, don't always be putting on that expression, what a waste of your good looks." Light yellow belt delicately makes a spin, Lin Ran Yi's slightly annoyed face turns back and meets his eyes, "After another few days, you will be returning to Yu Xia Guan, coming here today is to pray for blessings, you with that face like an ice block, don't go scaring away the great Buddha."

Deeply humming a sound of reply, Lin Rui En could only pull up a faint touch of a smile, looking a little helpless. Lin Ran Yi felt somewhat satisfied, pressing her lips into a smile, then quickly pacing herself upfront, squeezing into the crowded main hall.

The incense fire at Hong Fu Temple has always been prosperous, and today, one can practically describe it as vigorous flames (referring to the amount of incense being offered here). Lin Rui En marches in, in a neither rushed nor slow manner, along the way, he passes by the Luo Han Hall, Dong Yue Temple, Guan Yin Temple, Ran Deng Temple^[1], like looking at passing flowers on horseback as he looks around, seeing people everywhere, from officials and nobles, to merchants and commoners, in this world, there are actually this many people coming to worship the Buddha. sharp eyes following that light yellow figure as he heads all the way into the main Great Buddha Hall, where his steps comes to a stop. Raising his head, lifting his brows, the three prestige statues of the powerful and virtuous Shakyamuni Buddha jumps into his eyes, his heart and mind because of this is slightly stunned, ears still hearing the mystifying Buddhist mantras, Saha World whirling before him.

(Saha World originating from the Sanskrit language – meaning World of Endurance. Refers to this world of ours, filled with suffering and afflictions, yet gladly endured by its inhabitants. Credits: http://www.ic.sunysb.edu/Clubs/buddhism/glossary.html#S)

"The Great Buddha Hall (大雄宝殿), the greater being (大) accepts and contains all; the influential being (雄) seizes and vanquishes demons." Seeing Lin Rui En fall into a daze, Lin Ran Yi laughingly explains.

Seizes and vanquishes demons?

The sudden thought of bloody scenes on the battlefield flashes past his mind, the corner of Lin Rui En's lips spreads into a rarely seen smile, sitting high up like this, can capture and vanquish demons? Great Buddha, exactly is it you who is naïve, or is it the people of the world who are naïve?

Catching Lin Rui En's smile, Ran Yi jumps in front of him, a smile that can practically be called a crafty thief smile blossoming on her face: "You heard too right?"

"Heard what?" Lin Rui En doubtfully asks.

"The two greatest beauty of the Capital has come to offer incense ah," Displaying a face of understanding, Ran Yi clearly appears rather excited, "Having long heard of the Capital's 'spring firefly, night moon', really want to broaden my insight."

(Spring firefly, night moon or chūn yíng wǎn yuè / 春萤晚月: firefly – the Yíng / 萤 of Yao Ying; night – the Wǎn / 晚 of Gui Wan)

Should anyone else have said this, he would have already turned around and left, but facing this dear [older] sister of his, aside from being helpless, he could only be even more helpless. Seeing his lack of interest, Ran Yi purses her lips: "You are past the age of twenty already, should also be at the age to take in a wife, the young noble ladies of the Capital are a few, nor do I know which one would catch your eyes, should you continue to drag on like this, what is to happen to the Lin Clan's future generations of continuing to pass on incense? May as well take a look at the two great beauties today, such one in a million candidates, should you still not be attracted, I'm afraid you can only live this life as a monk." Dragging Lin Rui En along as she heads inside. (Incense is used as offering to pay respects to ancestors, Ran Yi is worrying whether there will be descendants to takeover this act of filial piety)

Lin Rui En knits his brows together, and can only follow along to the inner hall. Lin Ran Yi pulls aside the monks to ask, inquiring along the way, even making use of her identity in the end, and only then did she find, the two beauties has entered the temple from the back hall, she regretfully sighs, completely missed all opportunities. That is until she hears the two beauties has not yet left, her heart met with great pleasure.

"Sister, this is intrusive behaviour." Aware of Ran Yi's intentions, Lin Rui En coldly reminds.

"This is admiring flowers." Speaking proudly unashamed as she throws out those words, Lin Ran Yi snakes around the side of the spacious hall, giving Lin Rui En a "wait here for me" eye signal, as she heads towards the middle of the main hall.

Inwardly sighing to himself, standing for a while, he sees a few groups of little monks walk over, afraid that they will ask too much, causing more troubles, he paces away, walking aimlessly. Walking past the side hall, a soft female voice sounds from inside: "Young Lady, hearing the story just now, this stick is just too inauspicious, better to throw it away."

A sudden glimpse of white jade light, resoundingly hitting the ground, falling before his feet, Lin Rui En lowers his head, seeing the lustrous jade stick lie on

the floor, he bends down to pick it up, turning over the stick, strong and proper words carved into it reads "The Emperor Swallow".

"Ling Long, even if you are to throw it, you cannot throw it there, retrieve the stick, do not become the joke of others." Light voice like the breeze, laced with dazzling laughter, this voice is extremely pleasant to the ears, sweetly striking a deep chord in the heart, passing into the eardrum, Lin Rui En actually falls into a moment of trance. A burst of light jogging, the figure of a little maid in green runs out from the hall, against the light, it is difficult to get a clear look of her face. That maid called Ling Long also seems to have not expected someone to be outside the hall, slightly stunned, she respectfully bows, taking the stick, lowering her body as she says her thanking, before running back into the hall.

A cool breeze brushes against the body, whistling with not a speck of dust, no sound is heard from within the hall again, considering how secluded of an area this is, inside there is also a lady staying, he dares not to remain longer, Lin Rui En turns and leaves, glancing over before leaving, vaguely, his eyes spots a body of light soft silk hazily sheer, gown fluttering.

Once again returning to the spacious main hall, Lin Ran Yi greets him in frustration: "Both left already." With a faint reassuring smile, Lin Rui En says: "Why impose when it is not fated?"

Three days later, the Lin Estate receives a message from the ministry of defence, the Nu Army by Yu Xia Guan has occasionally been making strong sweeps across the bordering towns, Lin Rui En immediately leaves the Capital, heading straight to Yu Xia Guan. And at the time, the commander of the Nu Army, is the Nu King's most dearest second prince, Ye Li.

The evening wind rises, like a ferocious growl, residues of clouds in the horizon like silk, the gravel on the ground swept up, heaven and earth along with boundary of the vast plains merging into one, the viewer not knowing what part is sky, what part is land.

"General!"

Lin Rui En looks back, side profile appears to be clearly carved by wind blades, sharply defined, neatly outlined, with not a trace of roughness that comes with

fighting in battlefields. The arriving person is slightly stunned upon seeing this, innocently smiling, he hands over a bowl of soup, faintly drifting with fragrance that arouses interest.

"This is the meat broth the cook made, General still hasn't eaten yet, right?"

Extending his hand to accept the bowl of soup, so boiling hot that it's a little difficult to handle, he knits his brows into a barely visible frown, as he sends the soup in his mouth, a mass amount of hotness like fire, dashing down from throat to stomach. The chill brought within the wind follows the heat in entering his chest and dissipating.

"Thank you!"

"Eh.....ah?" The arrived person widens his eyes, seeming to be shocked by that phrase, as he waves his hands in unease, "General......General, why be so courteous......it is the cook who got me to send it over......I, I'm called Li Yong, the other soldiers calls me Da Yong......" Suddenly finding himself opening his mouth, speaking nonsense, his face flushes red, scratching at his own head. Not hearing the general's voice for a while, he raises his eyes to peek at Lin Rui En, on that coldly solemn face, lips like a crescent moon, seeming to carry a slight smile.

Turns out General is not at all as cold as he looks, in the end he is still a youth ah! As Da Yong thinks this, his courage strengthening up three points, lightly asking: "General, there is not even a few strands of grass growing here, you've been looking out for three days, exactly what are you looking at?"

Lin Rui En turns to look out into the vast horizon, saying: "I am looking at the sandy wind here."

"Sandy wind?"

"This is a land of bitter cold, sandy wind like hurricanes, but the Nu Army, has but honed their wills and fighting force that is even stronger than ours on such land....." Lin Rui En does not look back, softly sounding a lamenting sigh, as if speaking for himself to listen to.

Da Yong remains silent, hearing these words, he only feels that a certain chord in his heart has been stricken, yet unable to describe it. Thinking for long time, he finally speaks up: "The Nu Army is indeed formidable, engaging in battle with

us here for three months, but.....but, this land is big, easy to get around on horse, then we may be at a disadvantage, if, if there can be a change in location....."

Lin Rui En abruptly turns his head back, showing a face of somewhat surprise as he looks at the person.

Da Yong's heart constantly trembles, until meeting this young general's eyes, determination held within the clear frost, as though having just unsheathed a precious sword.

He has seen countless people come and go from the battlefields, but has never seen such that is free from masking, yet still holds exceptionally beautiful eyes. Such sparkling new yet coldly solemn eyes circles around his body, he could not help speaking up nervously: "Gen-General! Did I say something wrong?"

"No!" Lin Rui En says, "Your thoughts coincides with mine."

Da Yong looks at Lin Rui En dumbfounded, nor is he able to care about differences in status: "General is saying, what I said just now, is correct?"

Lin Rui En nods: "This land is a vast territory, most suited for cavalry battles, in a nutshell, a greater extent of outflanking is further assisted by the geographical advantage. And our army cannot compete with the Nu Army in horse-riding, the formidability of the foot soldiers also cannot be put into play, despite the strength advantage of our army, all will dissipate within the wind on the battlefield. Should we divert the Nu Army into the small hills, the surroundings there, restricts cavalry troops, the Nu Army will thus surely lose without a doubt."

Da Yong only knows to continuously nod his head in agreement. Behind an additional mellow voice sounds: "In General's opinion, what method should be used to attract the Nu Army into the small hills then?" Hearing this voice, Da Yong practically jumps to his feet. Turning his head back, indeed, it is one in a plain cotton robes, warm and refined in appearance, the middle aged literary man. Within the army, he can be said to be even scarier than General. Executing military punishments with not an ounce of mercy, not to mention witty and cunning, behind his back, all calls him the "Foxy Military Advisor".

Lin Rui En is not at all taken by surprise, only speaking coldly: "Did Military

Advisor's trip this time, go smoothly?"

Military Advisor warmly laughs: "The trip went smoothly, and all went as General had expected!" He glances at the lone nervous Da Yong who was stood by the side, once again asking, "What General was saying just now, does it link in with the task you set me on a little trip for?"

"It does." Lin Rui En generously admits, "The route Military Advisor went to determine this time, is precisely the crucial key to leading the Nu Army into their urns." He places down the empty bowl in hand, taking out an extremely thin sheep skin from his sleeves, flatly laying it out on the floor, using the bowl to hold down a corner, his finger pointing to where a cross had been marked on the map, asking: "Along the route Military Advisor followed, how many little towns were passed in total?"

"Five."

"Who is the Nu Army's commander?"

"Nu King's second son, Ye Li."

Military Advisor and Da Yong's replies came one after another. Lin Rui En ponders for a slight moment, before saying: "The opportune timing has come! Tomorrow, the troops shall be lead down two paths, one path continues to fight the Nu Army, and divert them west......"

Da Yong exclaims in surprise: "But the hills are in the northern direction, why divert them west?"

Military Advisor coldly sweeps his eyes across him, and he immediately feels his heart drum, the following words once again swallowed back into his stomach.

On the other hand, Lin Rui En was not at all bothered, continuing: "The other path goes straight into the small hills to set up an ambush. Whilst diverting the Nu Army to the western direction, there are five little towns along the road, only defeat is permitted not permitted to win. From looking at the military movements of the Nu Army these past three months, Ye Li is not at all an incompetent one, along the way west, a streak of five defeats, how can he not form doubts? Then slip into their army to spread rumours, saying that our army's real purpose for this trip is to directly attack Du Cheng, he already

suspecting these five defeats is to fool people, will inevitably fall into the trap. Right then, he can only ride away at full speed, leading the army back to Du Cheng, along the northern route, the ambush troops would have long been stationed in the small hills. And an alternative path, is but separated by thirty li of journey away, behind Ye Li's troops. So arriving in the small hills, where rows of hills connects one after another, the formidability of cavalry troops comes down to naught, with the Nu Army rushing around back and forth, they must be exhausted, our army attacking from front and back at this time, defeating the Nu Army, shall then be within hands reach."

Having finished hearing these words, Military Advisor does not speak for a long time, the hu hu sound of wind whistles past the ears. Da Yong's jaw drops, his mouth remaining open for a long time.

"You mastered it!" Military Advisor emits a long sigh, "Along the way, although I knew you had the thoughts to attract the Nu Army into the small hills, but after thinking for a long time, I was but unable to think of a thorough plan, this strategy among strategies of yours, affects the heart and minds alike, and exchanges labour for ease, using another's advantage to overcome one's own lacking. Has already surpassed me by a lot-la." Saying this final sentence, Military Advisor seems to feel a sense of loss. Warm and friendly eyes looking at Lin Rui En, only thinking back to his childhood times, his one brush one stroke taught him to quietly revise the arts of war, in a blink of an eye, he is but already capable of mapping out his own strategies alone, victories lining a thousand li. (Mastered as in, he has exceeded his master/teacher or has learnt all that his master/teacher has to offer, thus 'graduating' from his teachings)

Time flies, it truly is just a blink of an eye. The matters of this world, saying it's been long, adds up to several decades, but in actuality, is it not all but a blink of an eye?

Lin Rui En returns Military Advisor's gaze, only sensing that within that pair of fatherly eyes, he sees a lot, a softened look rolls past his own solemnly cold face. Turning away to also see Da Yong's face expressing surprise, and joy, and great respect. Behind, stands a city fortress, thousands of firelight stretching across the land......the arts of war learnt since childhood, all of teacher's contained expectations, not one was not for protecting these mountains and rivers steeled

with blood, thinking to this point, his chest could not restrain from firing up, tall body stands, looking far into the horizon.

Above the Yanshan Hills, the new moon like a hook.

Three days later, all went as Lin Rui En had planned. With the cavalry general leading troops to fight the Nu Army, fifty li away from Yu Xia Guan. This battle lasted half a day, Qi Ling Army suffering a small defeat, retreating west to Tan Cheng (a city), Nu Army follows west in pursuit. In the evening of the next day, the two armies clashes outside the city, Qi Ling Army once again defeated, further retreating thirty li to the west, going on like this for eight days, Qi Ling Army continuously retreated to five cities, Nu Army greatly victorious.

The Nu Army commander of this battle, Ye Li, is the Nu King's second son, arrogant in nature, exceptionally intelligent since young, greatly earning Nu King's doting, these several days of fighting with the Qi Ling Army, gaining victory again and again, his heart filled with great delight. Although a very prideful person, he is also very cautious. Unable to help from secretly forming doubts. Bringing the battle to halt for two days, gradually rumours were spreading amongst the army, and even gaining reports from spies, saying the great Qi Ling Army's retreats to the western direction is a diversion scheme, the remaining main army troops has already head north, directly attacking Du Cheng. Ye Li originally holding doubts in his heart, now seeing that the Qi Ling Army deliberately delayed them, is thoroughly convinced by the military reports, thus taking down the camp and setting off with the troops that very night, hurriedly rushing north. After a day and night, they rush into the small hills. Lin Rui En had long set up an ambush in the small hills. Thereafter, the cavalry general leads troops in closely tailing the Nu Army, attacking the Nu Army in the small hills from front and back.

This battle later called "Battle of the Small Hills". The Nu Army's continuous days of expeditions, rushing back and forth, had long become an exhausted army, but completely surrounded by hills, the formidability of their cavalry troops came down to naught, Ye Li with peerlessly fierce bravery, leads the troops all around for a surprise attack, bitterly struggling for an entire night, flowing blood forms rivers, a greater half of the Nu Army dead and injured, Ye Li wounded, and thus captured alive below the small hills. When being captured,

the majority of generals by Ye Li's side died amongst the chaotic battle. Ye Li overcome with great regret, and at the same time, was shocked at Qi Ling's scheme to lure the enemy, asking for the name of the enemy commander. To hear that Lin Rui En is almost twenty two years of age, and is even two years younger than himself, both stunned and worried, he falls into a long moment of silence, head raised to the heavens, emitting a long sigh, he only says: "I always thought I am already a hero at a young age, only with today's great defeat, do I understand the world is a big place, heroes of this generation is not only I alone." Sigh after sigh, he once again speaks up, "There will be one day, Lin Rui En shall be defeated by my hands."

Military Advisor hearing the soldier report his words, only laughs it off, giving it no care.

The army makes a few adjustments, Lin Rui En leads some of the troops back to the Capital, returning in triumph. A month pass, when they arrive in the Capital, it is currently the golden season of autumn, rows of maple trees dying the city, the dazzling setting sun in the river glows a golden light.

The night before entering the Capital, Military Advisor visited Lin Rui En's room, a face of spring breeze.

"General, the great merit of standing victorious in this battle with the Nu Army, you have the most credit, his majesty has already decreed, to promote you as the Fu Guo Great General^[2], from now on, you and Prime Minister Lou's civil and military ranks sits at the same level."

Lin Rui En is still sitting by the window, the golden wind (autumn wind) very fine, whisking in a room filled with drifting fragrance, he places down the book in hand, nodding slightly, his expression showing indifference, nor is there any show of joy. Speaking up to ask: "Has the Nu prince been handed over to the ministry of punishments?"

"Lord Ma already took the person away, he told me to congratulate General, and also said he will pay a visit in formal congratulations in the next day or so." Military Advisor mumbles on, taking a seat on the empty chair, waiting for a while, but still hears no reply from Lin Rui En, thus continuing to say, "Entering the Capital this time, must first prepare a generous gift for Prime Minister Lou."

Only now does Lin Rui En look at Military Advisor in bewilderment: "Generous gift?"

"Prime Minister Lou has already been married for half a month now, General you have been away, returning to the Capital now, naturally you need to do your fill of presenting a gift. Just don't know what to gift....."

Upon hearing this, he creases his brows, towards the etiquette within officialdom, he instinctively feels disgust towards it, placing the book onto the desk, his hand unconsciously exerting quite a bit of strength: "Just send whatever over."

Military Advisor gathers up his smile, lowering his voice, deeply saying: "General must refrain from taking such matters lightly, within the Capital, Prime Minister Lou is one you cannot offend most. In future you and he shall be on the same standing in the imperial court, must never overlook him. He a minister from the outside, with no relations to the imperial family on the inside, no backing of a powerful background on the outside, yet is able to secure himself the leading rank of civil service, dominating political affairs, this person in particularly is not at all simple."

"This does not have anything to do with me." Lin Rui En is very clearly not bothered.

"It has a lot to do with you." Military Advisor sternly lays out these words, but does not put out clearly, only using his eyes to look at the still young general, gloom contained within his eyes.

"Is his power too great.....?" Lin Rui En quietly says.

"No matter how great one's power is, it will never be as great as the heaven's, these thousand li of rivers and mountains are still the Son of Heaven's!" Lou Che's power in the imperial court truly is far too great, should one tree outshine the forest, the wind must cut it off. Could the current emperor truly be as weak and incompetent as he appears, with not a single ounce of his own assertive thinking? How could he simply leave Prince Duan to act so domineeringly within the Capital? And on the other hand, allowing the generations of loyal Lin family descendants to repeatedly offer outstanding service, appointing military power. Such moves, exactly is it of carelessness, or is it intentional? Always cautious in

facing movements within the imperial court, heart marking out a chart, Military Advisor squints his eyes, a trace of fine light revealed from his narrowed eyes, only half his sentence spoken, leaving the last half hanging.

Nor does one know whether he had heard and understood the hidden implications, Lin Rui En picks up the book again, turning a page, candlelight flickering in the wind, dimly shining on the words, the word also becomes hazy, blurring into a ball, as though it is about to vanish. He laboriously reads every word every sentence, lightly letting out a breath form his mouth, indifferently saying: "Prepare a generous gift for the Prime Minister Estate, Military Advisor personally go send it on my behalf, congratulating the blessed newlywed couple."

Military Advisor nods his head: "Have to guard against all people, yet also have to make others not guard against oneself, this is the key to longevity.....no, this is the key to survival in this world!"

He clenches the book, the ice-cold page infected with his body heat, warms, he casually flips the page, turning with a "hua—", Military Advisor's words had just finished, when the wind strengthens, the windows creaking.

Military Advisor gazes towards the window, pondering for a while, as though suddenly thinking of something, he says: "Prime Minister Lou is already married now, you're not young either, coming back to the Capital this time, should consider this problem of starting a family. Teacher has still not asked you before, what kind of lady do you like?"

Lin Rui En freezes, seeming to be absentminded, cold wind blowing in from the windows, wave after wave, brushes against his face. In his heart there seems to be a spot of emptiness, yet he does not know which spot it is. The candle flickers, stretching his shadow even longer, he quietly stares at it, Military Advisor's one phrase of "starting a family", drilling into his heart, seeming to evoke a certain soft spot in him, such that should never exist when on the battlefield......

Fingers loosening, the pages of the book is quickly whipped through by the autumn wind, page after page brushing past his chest, ears only hearing the sound of whistling wind, the flame flickers even more violently, light or dark difficult to stand steady.

He coldly looks towards that candlewick, the only thing carrying a bright light, quietly saying: "I don't know either."

Ministry of punishment Vice Minister Xiao Qian's horse carriage stops outside the doors of the Fu Guo General Estate. He steps down from the carriage and looks up, behaviour seeming a little weird. The horse carriage came from the end of the street, a complex mix of speeches can be heard in the ears, those selling groceries, those selling lamp oil, those selling ladies' rouge powders...... clamouring, displaying the prosperity of the Capital. But at this end of the street, the huge Fu Guo General Estate, two desolate stone lions squats by the main doors, aged through all those years, long been bruised by marks of time, the big doors rich in red lacquer has also dulled in colour. The long long alley really is like an unrolled scroll, starting from that spot of splendidly bustling noise, turning down to this spot of dwindling prosperity, washed off its magnificence, exposing its true face. Such a long autumn day, light and pleasant, displaying a different kind of beauty within this desertedness.

Such an estate, truly houses the one called "Wall of Qi Ling" — General Lin? Doubts running across his heart, but time does not allow for any delay in careful pondering, Xiao Qian takes two strides forward, the coachman had already knocked at the doors, a servant simple and cleanly dressed in grey, pokes his face out. Xiao Qian anxiously speaks: "Little brother, please pass onto General Lin, Vice Minister Xiao Qian of the ministry of punishment requests an audience."

That little servant eyes looks over the arrived person, seeing that although Xiao Qian's face appears calm, his eyes shows tremendous anxiety, not like the people who flocked over to send gifts these past few days. Opening the doors wider, the little servant bows his head and lowers his eyes, saying: "Lord Xiao please wait, I shall go report now."

Xiao Qian could not wait, one foot stepping inside, saying: "Little Brother, I have important tasks at hand, desperately need to see General, please be accommodating." The little servant is slightly stunned, seeing that Xiao Qian's expression does not look like an act, besides, why would a high ranking official like him commit a fraud, thus nodding his head. Leading the way into the estate.

The towers and pavilions within the Lin Estate is most commonly seen in official's homes, places where a pavilion should stand will have a pavilion there, where a chamber should stand will have a chamber there, every spot very normal, so bland that one cannot bring themselves to admire the surroundings. Only the courtyard filled with chrysanthemum flowers, cosily forming clusters, apricot yellow joyfully dances amongst such blandness, adding that dash of bright colour.

It is here that Xiao Qian sees one who is lowering his head in tending to the flowers, amongst such vibrant colour, Lin Rui En.

He lowers his body into a bow, stirring the branches, heart greatly distracted. The little servant stands among the flowerbeds, raising his voice in saying: "General, Lord Xiao of the ministry of punishments requests an audience."

His figure stalls, placing down the shovel in hand, he straightens his body, standing alone within the flower garden, jade stance tall and graceful, clear and bright demeanour, Xiao Qian inwardly sighs, bowing his head, hands gesturing a formal greeting, yet heart so anxious, he feels as though he stands within a cooking pot, seeing this young general, only makes one feel penetrating cold pressing down, even his heart stands still.

"General, Nu Prince Ye Li escaped!"

Lin Rui En raises a brow, his expression not looking particularly stern nor cold, yet Xiao Qian's heart is crazily beating, instincts tell him the youth in front is truthfully angered to the extreme, the frosty sternness between his brows, revealed with not the slightest of covering up.

"It is this subordinate's incompetence, Ye Li was in unbearable pain, I originally thought should he really die like that, it will be difficult to explain to his majesty, only transferred him into another prison cell, who knew....."

"Where has he escaped to right now?" Lin Rui En walks out of the flowerbeds with large dignified strides, the chrysanthemum leaves scatters onto the ground as he brushes past.

"Only know he was heading towards the Bai Hua markets when escaping," Xiao Qian lowers his head and eyes, stepping aside to give way, "General! The ministry of war has already sent out troops, the city gates also set up

government investigation checks, as long as martial laws are imposed on the entire city....."

"Do not alert the commoners!" Lin Rui En deeply frowns, lowly scolding, "The war has just ended, not suitable to cause turmoil in the hearts of the people."

"Yes!" Vice Minister of Punishments constantly nods his head, "Then General's meaning is?"

"Leave the soldiers to secretly investigate, the Nu Tribe's appearance is so distinctive, hiding within the vital centre of the Capital will be difficult, inevitably cannot have escaped far." His orders is like his person, clear and piercing like that of frosty wind blowing against the face, Xiao Qian readily responds with a yes.

Less than a short while passes, when guarding soldiers from the outskirts of the city had already received orders to enter the city under secret investigations. On this day, it is originally the day Lin Rui En lead the returning troops into the city, the commoners within the Capital overfilled with incessant joy due to the great victory in the border region, swarming the Bai Hua road, all of a sudden, outstretched necks looking out, heads like a flowing river, nobody would have thought, that young general had actually quietly entered the Capital two days ago, staying far away from glamorous splendour, a scene prosperous like a painting.

Lin Rui En walks out of the estate, greeting his eyes is this prosperous scene, streams of people flowing through the bustling streets of the Capital. Snaking his way out of the alley, the lanterns has only just been hung, thousands of lit lantern like pearls decorating the roadsides, the eaves of buildings connecting, cornice brackets, like thread linking to the imperial palace, roof levels scattered high and low, like a stream of overflow meeting that straight end, also like a distinct criss-crossing of a net, spreading over the Capital.

And Ye Li, just happens to be in the heart of this net.

Settling his mind, he heads towards Bai Hua Street, every step steady and strong, not at all thrown into disarray due the escape of a crucial criminal, the look in his eyes solidly fixed, looking all around, clearly gathering the entire street scene into his eyes.

The flood of people is most concentrated at the end of the street, tucked between the joyful commoners shuttling back and forth, like flickering shadows brushing past his sleeves. He stands at the end of the street, creasing his brows, he originally does not fit in such bustling places, standing amongst the crowds right now, sure is exhibiting this youth's prideful aloofness.

"Elder, it's particularly lively today, what's the reason for this?" A lowered voice asks this from a nearby spot, tone greatly delicately, very soothing to the ears.

Turns out that amongst these bustling streets, there is also one who like him, has strayed in here. He turns his head back, catching a glimpse of the owner of that voice, a slender figure, robes laced with silver silk, standing still in the corner of the street, a light colour wrongly painted within the crowds of a greatly complex mix. He had originally thought it was a woman, but after getting a clearer look of the back view, did he realise it is the son or a younger brother from an official's family.

The elder that the youth had asked of was extremely impatient, only saying: "Youngsters tend to only know how to have fun, not caring about the nation's affairs. Today, Young General Lin will be returning to the Capital, in a while, he shall be passing through Bai Hua Street."

Having already turned his eyes away, upon hearing these words, Lin Rui En once again glances back, but what he sees in this one glance is instead that elder who had kept his head down this entire time as he rambles on, head of hair half white, but upon saying the words Young General Lin, he is unable to conceal his pride. Lin Rui En's heartstrings were shaken, his steps that were already walking away also comes to a stop.

He was originally unaware, among the Capital and its environs, there is such a white-haired elderly man, setting up a stall at the end of the street, chatting away happily, and would mention his name in such a tone, what kind of an expectation that is, what kind of a pride that is, and how is it to compare to the gold and silver in the imperial court, the compliments of the hundred congratulating officials......

And the amount of significance that weighs down on this sound of "Young

General Lin", his heart cannot be any more aware, questioning oneself, does this add up to the equal amount of those soldiers who had spilled their blood on the battlefield?

Does this add up to the equal amount?

Heart abruptly weighing heavy, thinking that Ye Li is still in the midst of escaping, he gathers away his shattered thoughts, turning around in leave, never looking back again.

And in this moment, that elderly raises his head, looking up to the face of the inquiring youth, with rounded eyes and twisted tongue, he quietly mumbles: "Young people these days......are they all this good looking?"

A/N: This passage, everyone can compare it to the earlier third chapter of the novel "Chaotic", and realise this is simply that exact chapter written from Lin Rui En's point of view. And what the chapter title "Wrong Fate" refers to, is also very clear, he and her, just how many number of times have they brushed past one another?

We too are also like this, how many number of times, amongst the vast sea of heads in the crowds, with whom have we simply brushed past, and this one moment of missed encounter.....would a day come in the future, where it will play a crucial role in our lives?

[Note: Chapter Three "Chaotic" refers to the Chapter Two "Frost-like Youth" from the copy I translated from]

[1] Luo Han also known as Arhat http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/arhats.htm

Dong Yue Temple is dedicated to God of Mount Tai http://www.afar.com/places/dongyue-temple-beijing

Guan Yin also known as the goddess of mercy http://www.putuoshan.net/English/Seeings/guanyin2.php

Ran Deng also known as Dīpankara

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C4%ABpankara_Buddha

[2] **Fǔ Guó /** 辅国 – means one who **helps or assists in governing the country**. Also a top rank military position.

You probably all already knew there's a special chapter for General Lin from the chapter listing page haha, but yup I just had to finish it all off with the General, treat it as a Christmas present from me ...not to mention the author Duo Duo Wu also left a short but very meaningful message at the end of this special chapter, which I think, brings us to a nice thoughtful end hehe.

Thank you all for reading! And I hope you will all have a lovely Christmas and a happy new year!! ^o^